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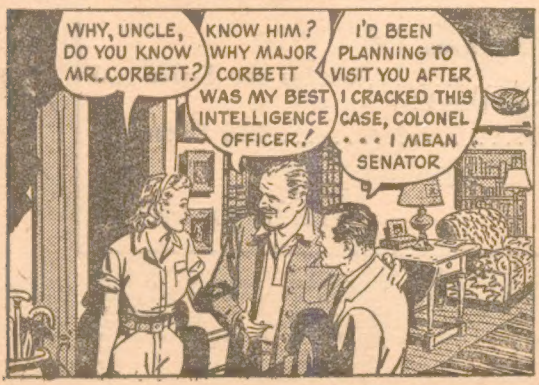
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NEXT ISSUE
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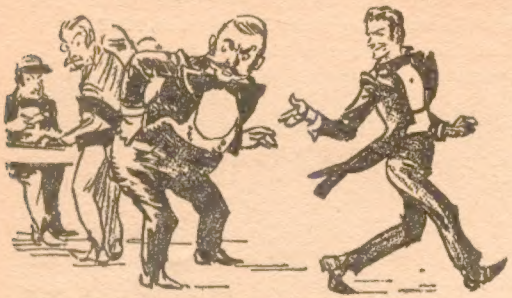
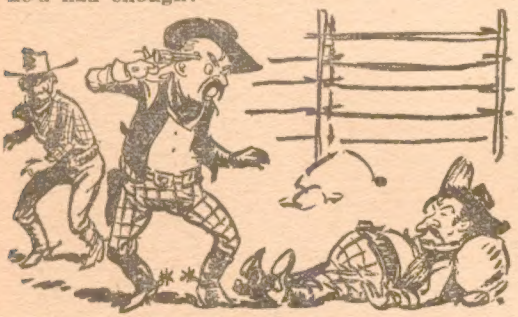
The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren



The Army's scheme to replace mules with imported Arabian camels in the Western deserts and mountains may have been a colossal failure militarily speaking, but at least it accomplished the complete moral reform of Johnny Benton, a Montana miner. A drinker whose capacity was the marvel of the Little Rockies, Johnny now was invariably cold sober. "In 45 years, I've seen white mice walking on the ceiling and bats crawling outa me hat," he said sadly, "but when I saw this gazook as big as a mountain, walking on stilts, with a head the size of a peanut and two humps in the middle of its back—well, never say Johnny Benton didn't know when he'd had enough!"



In June of 1885, General Sheridan was the laughing stock of Kansas, for his three week buffalo hunt had ended in a dismal failure. "I'll not leave these plains until I see a buffalo," he swore. But the general saw a buffalo the very next day. The animal was lying all by itself on a nearby hilltop. The military genius took a long, unbelieving look, then raised his gun and brought the animal under his sights. Instantly, it scrambled to its feet, sprouting two pairs of long, skinny legs clad in army blue and ending in shiny black shoes. "That wasn't in the bargain!" two of his young lieutenants shouted, throwing off the disguising robe. "You said *see* a buffalo, not *shoot* one!"

In Tucson's Congress Hall, in 1871, a slender stranger stood at a faro table gambling enthusiastically. He was having such a good time that the proprietor, Jim Knowles, found himself hoping for the first time that a sucker would be able to beat the house. At last, however, the young man shrugged and turned away from the table. "What's the matter?" asked Knowles sympathetically, "Did you lose all your money?" The young man paused at the door. "No," he chuckled, "you did!" and stepped outside. Knowles slapped at his bankroll in a panic. It was gone! The likeable gambler had been systematically picking his pocket and had lost it all on Knowles' own crooked faro wheel.

Waldo Kilgore's only claim to fame was that he was a dead ringer for Hugo "Red" Marshall, a trigger-tempered road agent who was terrorizing the lonely mountain trails between Quincy and Oroville in 1876. Several times, he was mistaken for Marshall and arrested, and this gave the highwayman an idea. "We'll put my clothes on him, fill him full of lead and leave him around where he'll be seen," he plotted. Struggling and terrified, Waldo was soon dragged before the bandit leader. Marshall took a good look at his double. "Is that what I look like?" the gunman screamed despairingly, and turning his six-gun around, he put a bullet through his own head.

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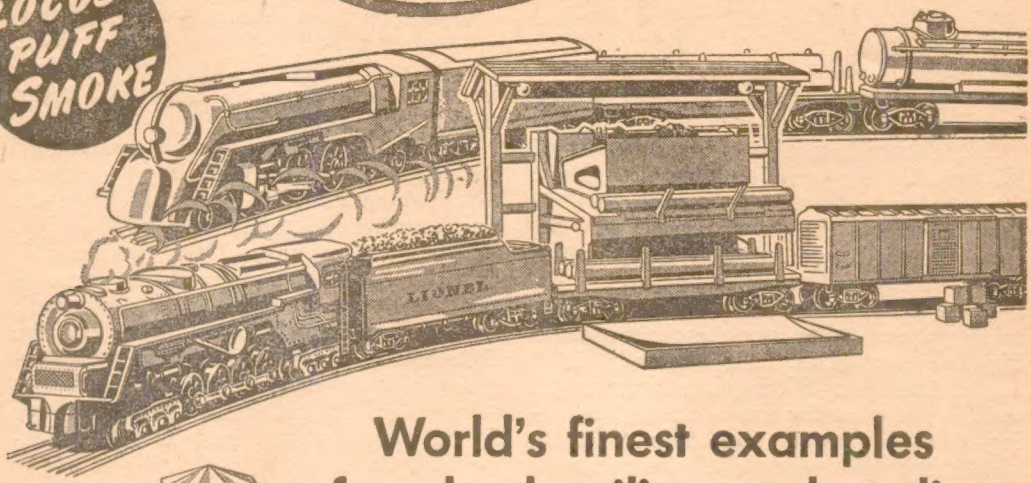

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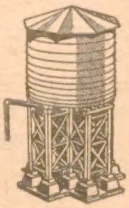

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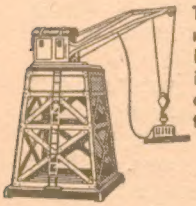

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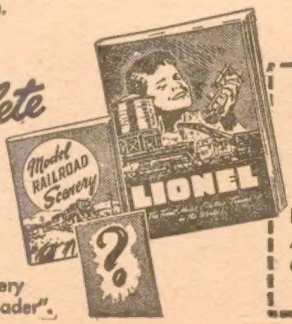

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★ THE STRAWBOSS ★

A FRIEND of ours from Montana way dropped in the other day, and in the course of the palaver, he shoved back his Stetson and started to moan a little about the food situation and the government and the O.P.A. and what not.

"My great grandpa," he said, "may have had his troubles with the Indians, but he shore didn't have to worry about food shortages and rationing and pricing and such-like."

"The heck he didn't," we said. "You just start looking into the history of Virginia City, around the year 1864-65—" and we told him the story of the famine in that year.

The roustabouts who composed most of Virginia City's population knew little about food raising. Miners, for the most part, all they knew was the art of separating gold from the earth and spending same in the nearest forty-rod emporium.

Most of the food that came into the little mining town came over the desert in the big freighter trains. The winter of 1864 was a bad one. Mountain storms raged around the town for weeks on end, covering mountain passes with tons of snow, obliterating the trails. Until the spring of next year, the hardcase miners knew, there would be no food coming into Virginia City.

In that fertile ground, both panic and avarice grew rapidly. The miners who had stored little food, grew desperate. And the merchants cornered the flour market and raised the price to $1.50 a pound.

Among the miners there was threatening talk about raiding the merchants' storehouses; and finally the talk crystallized into action. A "Flour Committee" was organized for the purpose of gathering all the flour in town and rationing it out fairly.

For one solid day the committee went from store to store, from warehouse to warehouse, gathering all the flour they could find. When a few thieving souls attempted to take advantage of the situation by looting other supplies, Deputy Sheriff Neil Howie made a little speech which quickly discouraged them.

"Gentlemen," said the lawman, "I understand the purpose of this little uprising is to get flour. Let's keep it that way. The first man caught looting will be shot."

At the end of the day, all the flour collected was stored in a community hall and carefully weighed. A citizen's committee took charge, allowing the owners of the flour $36 per hundredweight, and giving each miner a ration of 18 pounds of flour. The hungry miners willingly stood in line for hours, waiting to exchange their sacks of gold dust for the precious flour.

In short order, the committee reduced the ration to ten pounds. Even so, there wasn't enough flour to go round. But there was more of the grain in Virginia City. When word got around that women and children would go hungry unless more of the life-giving foodstuff were discovered, caches were quickly broken out, and the little mining city was tided over the emergency with no one going hungry.

We finished our little story, and our friend from Montana sat pensively, thinking it over.

"I guess they were pretty smart in those days," he said.

Smart? They sure were. Those gents who carried the torch of civilization across a mighty continent were mighty smart. They had to be, to live. They were so smart that a living legend was created out of their deeds, and a whole literature, as exemplified by this very magazine, grew up about them, celebrating their exploits and their wisdom and courage.

But they were more than just "smart." There was a wisdom and a warm, human understanding in those old gents that we would do well today to copy. Those hombres had learned a lesson that we are learning the hard way: That there's only one way to get along—by helping your neighbor, sharing your plenty with those who don't have enough, and seeing that every man gets a fair ration of this world's goods.

That's what America stands for—plenty for everybody, and no man going without.

—THE EDITOR.

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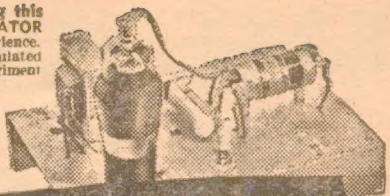

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THE OUTCAST OF

CHAPTER ONE

The Killers of Black Pass

BOONE KEEGAN was in the blacksmith shop at Stocker's Ferry when news of the attack on the Dog Diggings miners came.

The report was brought by a simple-minded youth who lived with his father, a placer miner, on Starr Creek. First sight of the overgrown shambling boy, racing in on a rawboned sorrel, his long arms flopping like great wings with the horse's lope, brought laughter from the loafers sitting in the shade of the big rock and adobe store supply building. They laughed still harder when the youth yanked back the horse with a jerk that sent froth flecks flying from the bit, but his first words silenced the laughter.

"Injuns jumped three wagons out in

Boone pointed his six-shooter straight at Shuff. "Come through!" he ordered. "Talk!"

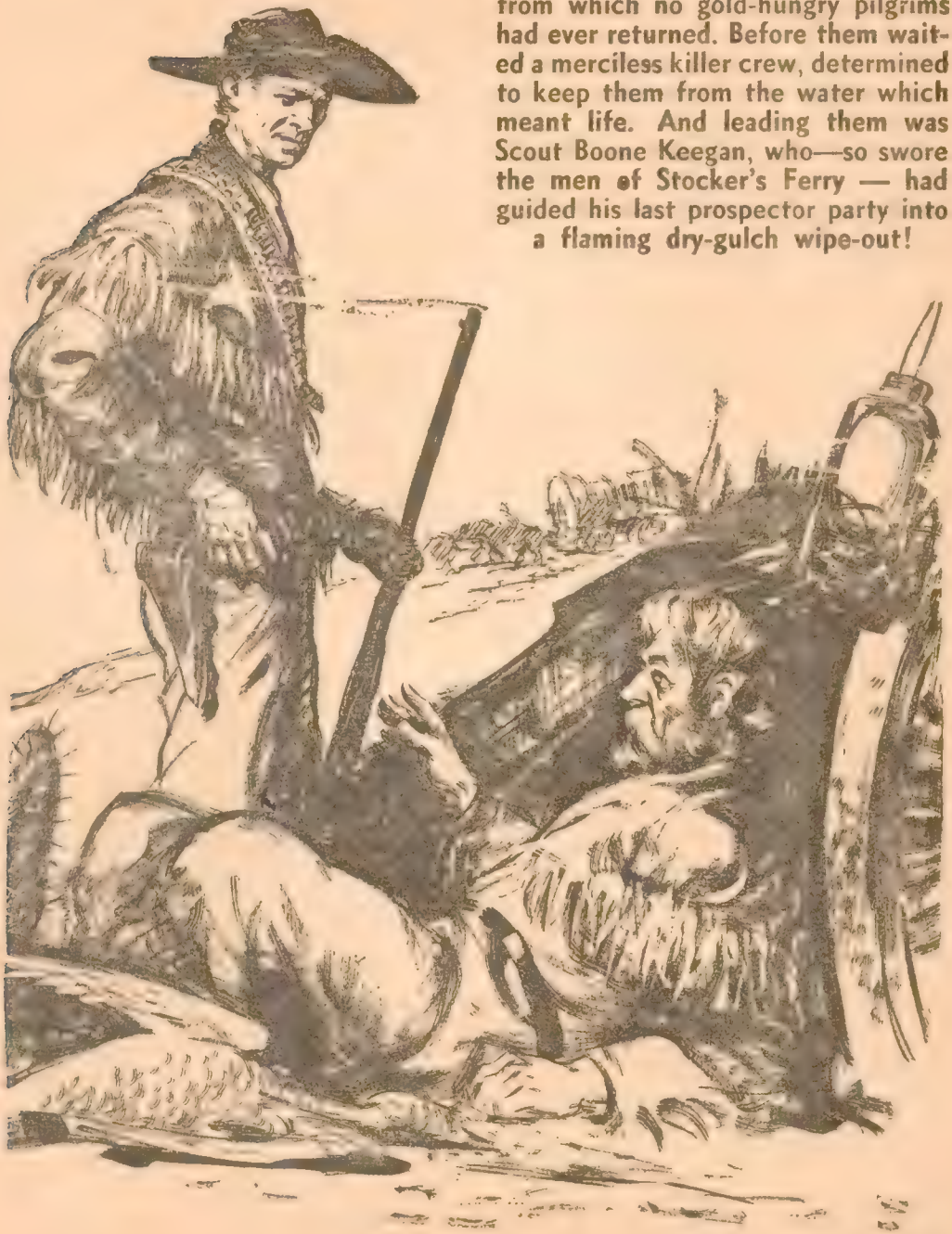
Smashing Saga of Desert Gold—and Death!

By

RAY NAFZIGER

MASSACRE PASS

Behind those wagon-train pioneers lay the hell-hot Picachos desert sink, from which no gold-hungry pilgrims had ever returned. Before them waited a merciless killer crew, determined to keep them from the water which meant life. And leading them was Scout Boone Keegan, who—so swore the men of Stocker's Ferry — had guided his last prospector party into a flaming dry-gulch wipe-out!



Black Pass," he bawled. "Killed all the men and hosses. The turkey buzzards was eatin' on 'em when me and paw found 'em."

Boone Keegan, inside the smithy where he was having an axle replacement made for one of the wagons of the Dog Diggings group, stiffened. His six-foot, square-shouldered body turned rigid.

There was only one possible wagon train which could have been moving through Black Pass—the miner bunch he was guiding from Dog Diggings. But this couldn't be the Dog Diggings outfit; he had told them to stay camped at Tornillo Well until he got back with the wagon repair. The rider was talking crazy.

He stepped outdoors and started crossing the packed ground to the big supply store. "You're lying," he called to the youth sternly. "Those men and wagons are at Tornillo Well where I told them to wait for me."

The half-witted youth's mouth popped open; he worked his jaws several times before he spoke. "B-b-but I seen 'em dead, M-M-Mister Keegan," he stuttered. "A big feller with a sandy mustache, layin' alongside his buckskin saddle hoss. An' two oldish bal'-headed fellers that was a-drivin' wagons, layin' by the wheels, shot through the head. Then there was a red-bearded feller that they slashed most to pieces and tied to a wagon and set afire. Only the fire went out 'fore it burnt to him."

Keegan shook his head numbly; the youth had described four of the eight men with the Dog Diggings wagons. Unaccountably the men had moved on from the Well. With a growl deep in his throat, Keegan ran to his saddle horse, eating hay in a 'dobe-walled corral. Other men were also running for horses, among them Stocker, "Honest John" Stocker, bluff, gray-bearded proprietor of the Stocker store and ferry.

It was seven miles to the Pass and Keegan on his gray half-Arab mount was leading the others by nearly a mile when he pounded up to the rocky blistering-hot little saddle through which a road wound between baked cliffs. The placer miner had chased the buzzards off, but held by the bodies of horses and men below, they were circling in the sky. Sickening odor from the charred bodies of several of the horses shot in their harnesses and consumed with the burned wagons, filled the air. The massacre was a grisly sight, even to Boone Keegan, a twenty-eight-year-old veteran of many Indian fights and raids.

The placer miner, sitting on a stump and smoking a pipe, had left the bodies where he had found them. "Looks like they didn't have a chance," he remarked. "Jumped while they was stringin' out through the Pass."

Keegan, sitting his saddle, his face hard and bleak as the rock of the cliffs, looked about him, still stubbornly unwilling to believe his eyes. "I told 'em to stay at the Well until I got back with that wagon iron. And instead they left the busted wagon and come on with the other three. What the hell did they start moving for?"

He was talking only to himself; he expected no answer to his question. What was important was that the eight men had started out for some reason and had ridden into a death trap. The simple-witted youth had described four of the dead men. Keegan saw the other four now, two of them lying behind boulders where they had put up a short, futile fight. Young Jay Emory sat against a cliff, rifle in his hands, body wedged in the rocks, his blond head erect, seeming to stare defiantly at the enemy. At him Boone looked the longest, while the blood ran cold in his veins. Boone had felt a close kinship with Jay Emory in the short time of the journey from Dog Diggings.

Some of the murdered men had left families back east; young Emory had a sister living in a big family house on a run-down farm. Emory had been taking his share of the gold back to rebuild the farm.

"A lot of gold with these wagons from what I heerd," said the miner. "It don't seem reasonable Injuns would know about that, but look at them tracks."

Keegan's gray eyes had already noted the moccasin tracks everywhere and the marks of unshod pony hoofs. He dismounted slowly, scowling in his concentration to see all there was to see, walking about to examine the dead men, the horses, and the wagons.

The middle wagon had been carrying the gold; it had been looted, the treasure boxes broken open and the loot transferred evi-

dently to sacks which could be packed on horses. A single gold nugget lay in the dust. Only the sky and the distant bleached skeletons of range could answer where the robbers had gone.

The placer miner's eyes were fixed on Keegan's face. "Only time you ever lost a wagon train you guided around this country, ain't it, Boone?"

BOONE KEEGAN, slowly circling the scene of the slaughter, did not answer. Looking down intently on the murdered men who had hired him to pilot them from Dog Diggins, he did not even hear. The country was full of outlaws who knew that fifty thousand dollars in gold, cleaned up by these men in Dog Diggins, was being taken to Stocker's Ferry for shipment on a little river steamer. Keegan had taken every precaution, endlessly scouting during the day to ward off enemies, placing the men and their treasure at night within protecting walls of stone.

Looking at the death scene, Keegan's jaw muscles corded, his eyes stared like a madman's. He lifted his right hand as if taking an oath. "I swear that the renegades who did this—" he began, and stopped. Words were weak. Only action counted now—action to bring vengeance.

Carefully he assayed the details of the raid. The attack would fool ninety-nine of a hundred fairly experienced Westerners, but Boone Keegan was not fooled. This was no Indian ambush. Moccasins and unshod ponies yes, and the savagery with which the red man killed their white enemies, but these did not always spell Indians. Indians would have driven off the horses, lingered to loot the wagons of more than just the gold.

The sound of hoofs came; the other men from the Ferry were coming. Honest John Stocker rode in the lead, his long gray beard flowing on the breeze. On his heels came a dozen others.

Stocker pulled up, gave an exclamation. "Good God!" he said. "Butchered to the last man, the poor devils. Indians?" he asked.

"Moccasin tracks all around," said Keegan briefly.

"But no telling what color feet was in 'em, eh?" said Stocker shrewdly. "And Indians generally don't hanker after gold. It wouldn't of happened if you'd been with 'em, Boone."

"I told 'em to stay at the Well," said Boone. "Left 'em forted up where they'd be safe against forty men."

Stocker nodded. "I hope people will believe that," he said earnestly. "Nobody will ever say any different around me."

Keegan shot him a quick look. "What do you mean?"

"Boone," Stocker said soberly, "you know what plenty men will say—that you went off and left these fellers a-purpose and that you was in cahoots with the gang that got this gold. Men will be afraid to say it to your face, but I'm saying what they'll be saying behind your back, because I'm your friend. We've got to find the gang that did this. Let's take their trail. You lead the way and we'll run 'em down."

"They got a long start," said Keegan. "Too long for a party without grub and good horses to follow. I'll go it alone." He pulled a little book from his pocket. The miners had given him their names and addresses and nearest of kin when they had left Dog Diggings. He handed the book to Stocker. "You'll have to write their relatives," he said. "They gave me an advance of a thousand dollars that I banked in your safe. See to it these men get decent burial in coffins, and with the graves marked."

Stocker nodded. There was a burial ground back of the store, started when the Ferry had been an Army post.

Once more Keegan looked at the scattered bodies, his eyes lingering longest on young Jay Emory who sat back against the little cliff. These men had trusted in him to take them safely to Stocker's Ferry. Now the only thing he could do was to track down the renegades, white or red, who had done this. He realized the difficulty of that job. The raiders had vanished into an uninhabited area hundreds of miles square, with broken mountain ranges which could hide whole armies, with smooth hard-floored valleys where winds swept away tracks, with vast stretches of volcanic malpais where hoofs left no print.

He rode off on the trail of the pony hoofs. Allowing for the horses necessary to pack away the gold loot, there had been, he guessed, ten or twelve men in the at-

tacking party. He could have named many times that number of white renegades in the Stocker's Ferry country who would have been riding those ponies had they been invited to join the raiders. What he had to discover was which particular renegades had been guilty. The trail he followed should tell.

He could manage to live off the country while on the trail; there were scattered prospector camps where he could get the little food he needed to carry him through a few days.

The first few hours of trailing were enough to tell Boone that he was following a bunch smart enough to use all the known devices for covering their trail, and a few unknown. They had split up after a few miles, Apache fashion, to make the job of trailers hard, to come together in a band ten miles away, only to split again. They made use of the malpais country to hide their tracks. They sent men to circle to throw off pursuit. He tracked one party finally after many circlings to the river. There were no tracks above or below and none on the other bank after he had risked the current to swim the stream. He figured finally that they had put their horses into the stream and shot them to let the bodies drift off while the men had taken a boat. At night no one would see them land down river. He retraced his way to follow another party; that trail also ended at the river. His hard search had told him nothing except the renegades had escaped by way of the river. Wearily he headed back to Stocker's Ferry, gaunted down like his gray half-Arabian which had covered enough desert country to kill three other mounts.

Reaching the Ferry, he rubbed down the gray, fed him and then headed for the Stocker saloon, next to Stocker's supply store. When he entered, the two dozen men in the place turned eyes on him, and their talk died to a complete silence.

"What luck?" called John Stocker, who was tending bar.

"No luck," said Keegan and moved to the bar, picked up a bottle to pour out a drink. Then downing it he turned to face the room. No one had spoken to him. The men were looking at him silently. He realized with a start that some were openly contemptuous; others were smiling a little as if wondering what cock-and-bull yarn he would give them about losing the outlaws' trail. John Stocker had been right—they believed he had engineered the raid on the wagons.

HE HAD ridden away from Stocker's Ferry a few days before as Boone Keegan, trusted scout and guide for Army and private wagon trains, respected by men who gave respect grudgingly. In this desert country which was his home, he had been accounted the most skillful in dealing with all manner of disasters and emergencies. If men were lost, he was called in to find them; if Indians had kidnaped someone, he led rescue expeditions. Save for the mutters of envious rival scouts, there never had been a whisper of scandal against his name, any more than there was against the respected oldish merchant, Honest John Stocker. Stocker and Keegan were held to be two men who could not be bribed or bought, who would not cheat or steal for any amount of gain.

Now that was over as far as Keegan was concerned. His reputation was ruined; everywhere it would be said he had sold out. He saw it in the faces of the men in the bar. You'd think they would give him the benefit of a doubt, but plainly he had already been tried and convicted.

He downed a second drink. "No luck," he repeated. "The men that did it were white men, and smart white men, They got away in boats. That's all I know, but I'll run them down."

Stocker lowered his voice. "It's worse against you than I expected," he said. "If I was you I'd go to California for a while. You remember that Tule Harvey who hung around here—"

Keegan nodded. Tule was a no-good sort, little bigger than a dwarf. He rode in occasional races and made a living by odd jobs.

"Tule," said Stocker, "when we came back from the raid, said you'd sent him out to tell the men at the Well to leave the busted wagon and move on toward the Ferry, that you'd ride to meet them."

Keegan's sunburned face darkened. "He did?" he said. "Where is this Tule?"

"That very night," said Stocker, "Tule was killed in his room—stabbed to death."

Keegan stiffened. So that was why men

regarded him as convicted. They thought he had sent Tule as messenger to tell the miners to leave their little fort.

"That's why I think you should cross the river tonight and stay in California for a while," said Stocker. "Speaking as an old friend of yours. I know Tule lied but others don't know it. I can't figure out why he told that lie."

"Somebody paid him and then killed him to see he kept still," said Keegan. "And men will take the word of a liar like Tule against mine. Next time," he said, "I'll be in with the gang that collects the pay-off on a job like this."

He nodded toward a quart bottle of whiskey and tucking it under his arm, went out in a dead silence. He knew that the talk would spring up soon enough after he was gone.

He went past the cemetery. There were stones marking the fresh graves of the miners. And all this country, except for a few like Honest John Stocker, believed that he was responsible for those graves.

He knocked the neck off the bottle and drank deep.

Treachery was common in this land. Miners killed their partners to double their fortunes; every fourth man you talked to was an outlaw. The country itself was treacherous. Men disappeared without a trace. In the searing heat of the desert to the south a water hole that was full one month would be dust dry the next and because of that dry hole you might die.

Looking at the graves, Boone Keegan who had seen too much treachery and slaughter for his less than thirty years, had a weak moment. He wished he were lying with the men. He went to his room to drink himself into a stupor.

CHAPTER TWO

Judge Lynch Takes a Hand

BOONE KEEGAN had never been a drinking man but after the Black Pass massacre, he became one. He changed overnight in many ways. From a man friendly with everyone, calm, he became morose, ready to explode into anger. Drink was his only occupation; day after day he sat in the bar next to Stocker's big supply store, drinking. No one dared say anything to him except Honest John Stocker, who always had a few friendly words despite Keegan's surly returns.

Boone Keegan told himself he was playing detective. He would find the solution of the Pass massacre in this barroom, perhaps in a careless word dropped by a drunk. Maybe a man would walk in with a rawhide poke of Dog Diggings dust, coarse red dust like no other gold in the Territory. Sooner or later the guilty were bound to come to Stocker's, which was the meeting place for a network of spider-like trails leading from the river, north, east and south. Everyone in the country came to Stocker's Ferry to get supplies, to drink or gamble. Honest John provided no gambling in his place, believing gambling was a wrong way to get money, but there were plenty of opportunities for poker or faro or Mexican monte in the settlement.

Had Keegan been outwardly decent in his treatment of others, friends might have turned the tide of opinion in his favor. Instead, his surliness, his refusal to defend himself, his resentment of even what he considered a hard look, made the hostile talk grow. When a foolish drunken stranger muttered one day at the bar, "Whiskey is as good a way as any to spend fifty thousand dollars," Keegan overhearing the remark, struck the man from behind. It was a half hour before the man came to. Men who knew how quick he could be with a gun gave him a wide berth, but secretly the talk and the demand that he pay the penalty for his suspected crime increased. The law should do something, the talk ran; if the law refused, Judge Lynch should be called in. The law was doing nothing, headed by a territorial government far away which just then was too worried by Apache raids to be bothered.

Still, Keegan might have gone his way without trouble but for the arrival of a girl who descended from a dusty Eastern stage. She was young, twenty at most, and unbelievably pretty in a blue suit and a small flowered hat with golden hair showing under it. Her trunk was unloaded, and the girl went to the hotel that Stocker ran in connection with his store. Word spread in the next few hours that she was the sister of Jay Emory, one of the murdered miners.

She made inquiries about the murders

and was referred to Ben Shuff, a lanky old ex-Indian scout. Shuff was one who had been talking most against Keegan. Later that afternoon with a small group of men as escort, she sought out Keegan, finding him sitting in the shaded doorway of his room, the inevitable whiskey bottle at his elbow.

"Your name is Boone Keegan?" she asked.

He got half to his feet, where once he would have snapped upright. "Boone Keegan, at your service," he muttered.

"I am Mary Emory, sister of Jay Emory," she said quietly. She had Jay's direct blue eyes and his same direct way of speaking. "They tell me you left the men in a fortified place, then sent out word that they were to go on. I should like to ask your explanation."

"Why don't you ask the ones who have told you all that?" he returned sharply. "They'd be glad to explain." He looked at her, with her clear blue eyes, her cheeks a little flushed. She was the sister of the young fellow he'd liked and he'd have been willing to explain to her every detail of that day, but she was accusing him of murder and he'd explain nothing.

"Did they tell you I sold out the wagon train and brought in a gang to steal their gold?" he went on. "Of course they told you that; they know all about it."

His anger couldn't keep him from seeing himself as she saw him—frowsy, drunken, refusing to answer her directly. What men thought of him he had steeled himself to meet, but what this sister of Jay Emory thought he could not take. Facing her he realized suddenly that he was only fooling himself; he wasn't playing detective; he was only drowning himself in liquor to blot out the memory of the Pass massacre, instead of working to clear himself by bringing the murderers to justice.

"Some say," Mary Emory went on, "that there will be hangings some day for those murders. I will be here to see them. If there was any real law here, you would have been hanged long ago. I will be here to see you hanged, Boone Keegan."

He made a mocking bow, but his anger vanished before the girl's accusing eyes. He could not blame her. He should have explained his side to her, but the words he could have used to defend himself had rusted on his tongue. The girl and the men went away and he emptied the bottle to lie in a sodden stupor on his bunk. The sun went down, a smoking red ball into a cloud bank, and night came.

He was lying snoring drunkenly when someone shook his shoulder. It was one of Stocker's bartenders. "Wake up, Boone, wake up!" the man was repeating urgently. "Wake up and ride out—quick. They're coming after you."

Keegan growled and turned to go to sleep again. The man sloshed a bucket of water over him. Keegan sat up.

"Get out of here, Boone," the man ordered. "They're going to string you up, savvy? It's come to a head, with that girl coming in here. That scout, Ben Shuff, and three-four others been talking strong you ought to be lynched and the crowd's drunk enough to do it. They're going to make you tell who your partners are and then string you up."

Keegan reached for an unopened bottle under his bunk but the man threw it to the other side of the room. "Lay off that or they'll get you. You can't fight a mob. Ride out quick."

"To hell with them," growled Keegan. "I won't run. Stocker would of warned me if they planned anything against me."

"Honest John's gone for the night. I tell you they'll be here in fifteen minutes, with Ben Shuff leadin' 'em. He's always hated you, Boone; he knows he's only a phoney scout while you're the real article. Tonight he's drunk enough to lead a necktie party in your honor."

Keegan hesitated, then with a slow deliberation he gathered his riding jeans, his rifle, his two filled cartridge belts, a revolver and the inevitable canteen filled with water he always carried on rides. Unsteady on his feet he lurched out of the door just as a burst of savage yells from the Stocker bar indicated that the bartender had given him good advice.

"Hurry," urged the bartender. "Stocker told me to get you away if trouble developed. Said to tell you to ride down to Virdlen's and stay." Tom Virdlen, a nephew of Honest John Stocker, ran a trading post on the edge of the desert.

Keegan nodded. Where he went made little difference.

His favorite horse, the gray half-Arabian with more endurance and heart than a whole herd of mustangs, was in the corral. The bartender disappeared while Keegan headed for the corral, mumbling to himself, of half a mind to go up to the saloon and defy the crowd. At the corral he rolled a cigarette and flung it away without lighting it. The gray had not been ridden for weeks and was fractious, moving out from under the saddle. Keegan swore and at that instant he could hear the shouts redouble in volume. The mob had come outdoors and would be heading for his room. Hastily he cinched on the saddle, slipped the rifle into the scabbard.

"He's at the corral, trying to get away!" someone yelled. Keegan, a snarl on his face, took his rifle and went to the gate. The starlight showed a crowd of thirty men or more. He had a mind to shoot; the crowd running toward the corral would be an easy target. He could bring down four or five before the rest could scuttle to safety. Branded for life with the massacre of the Dog Diggings men, he might as well accept the brand and live up to it.

He raised the rifle, but he was no killer at heart; his life had been given to saving people from being killed. He sent a shot slicing the air over the heads of the running men. They scattered to the cover of the buildings to begin firing at him.

Swinging aboard the gray, he rode out by the gate on the opposite side of the corral and headed south. The men heard the hammer of hoofs and rushing out began firing.

Shots lanced the air about Keegan, but the men were in all stages of drunkenness and shooting wild. He raced the gray toward a low bluff falling to the plain and recklessly plunged over the rim. The shouting and the crash of guns faded. There was no attempt to follow. The men of the mob knew too well that Boone Keegan could pick a convenient barricade and in the starlight knock them from their saddles.

A MILE from the Ferry settlement, Keegan let the gray take a ground-covering, running walk. There was a freight road to Virdlen's trading post but he knew a route to cut its distance in half.

In mid-morning Keegan was pulling his sweated saddle blanket off his horse at Virdlen's, set in a little oasis in a canyon bottom, where never-failing springs watered tall cottonwoods. The main building was a ramshackle affair, a store and bar combined, of small poles set upright, plastered over with mud. Prospectors came into the trading post with rawhide sacks of gold dust, sometimes pack horses loaded with rich gold and silver ore. Occasionally, there passed a few wagons traveling the desert route to California, people gaunt, half dead from fighting the Picachos Desert, a huge, desolate area, blasted by searing heat, almost rainless, with a little water found in natural tanks or fed by springs, but never except during cloudbursts in running streams. No people could subsist in the Picachos, not even the Indian tribes who descended to eating grasshoppers. A few discoveries of gold, silver and copper had brought a scattered population into it. It was these people whose needs Tom Virdlen supplied. His post was on the edge of the Picachos.

Virdlen, a happy-go-lucky blond fellow of thirty, who had a pretty squaw for a wife, gave Boone a hospitable greeting. "Uncle John wrote me you might be down to visit me," he said. "Said they had it in for you because of that wagon raid."

Keegan nodded. "I had to skip out or kill some men last night," he said briefly.

He ate breakfast and learning that some of Virdlen's horses had strayed, he volunteered to hunt them. It took him three days to find them, in a remote canyon where they would eventually have starved if he hadn't gotten them out. A day later a pair of prospectors hired him to guide them to a camp on the east side of the desert. The trip took a week.

Riding again, the desire for liquor vanished, but he was wasting time here he knew, doing nothing that would erase the hatred and disgust in the eyes of the girl with the ash-blonde hair, Jay Emory's sister. He had to make a fresh start at unraveling the mystery of the raid, but he saw no place to make a beginning at this remote post. If he went back to the Ferry, he would have to kill to keep from being killed.

Honest John Stocker wrote him that it was not safe to come back; that the girl, Mary Emory, had hired Ben Shuff to investigate the murder of her brother. Shuff

was a crook; he would take the girl's money and give nothing back.

He was still at Virdlen's when a light wagon came from the north. It carried a cook-driver who was an old-timer from the Ferry and a young Easterner who was visiting the country. The Easterner, Palmer, asked to ride out with Keegan. Palmer was a smart young fellow but green as grass in this country. Keegan took him to a placer camp fifteen miles away where Palmer asked the miners a thousand questions, as if wanting to learn all about the business.

The two were riding back to Virdlen's the next morning under a beating sun when a figure, moving slowly across a little valley below the ridge they were on, caught Keegan's hawk-like eyes. He brought out the spyglass he carried in a special pocket built on his saddle. It was a man crawling on all fours.

Keegan loped off the ridge with the tenderfoot clattering along behind him. They found the man in almost complete collapse, his body shrunken and burning, his eyes all but blind, his tongue horribly swollen. Great blisters covered his hands from crawling over the heated ground.

Keegan dribbled a little water from his canteen over the man's face and lifted him into his saddle to take him to the nearest shade. There with more water on his lips the man tried desperately but vainly to talk, to tell something urgent. Finally with a hand shaking from weakness he tried to write in the sand. The letters jumbled hopelessly. At last he drew a rectangle and put two round circles below it.

"A wagon?" Keegan asked, and the man nodded and held up three fingers. Three wagons. Then, "How many people?" Keegan asked.

The man drew two parallel marks—11. In answer to Keegan's questions he indicated by nods that the wagons were to the southeast, their people without water; that he had ridden for help and his horse had given out. He was vague on miles and hours and days. He was sure only of the fact that somewhere in the blazing Picachos Desert were eleven men, women and children who were lost, out of water, with their horses unable to pull the wagons further.

Boone Keegan again lifted the man to his saddle and mounting behind him loped for Virdlen's. The tenderfoot, Palmer, followed. At Virdlen's, Tom Virdlen himself, two freighters and several prospector had just begun sampling a fresh barrel of whiskey brought in by the freighters. A search in the wide area of the Picachos was almost doomed to certain failure, but they would go, of course, Virdlen providing a wagon and four-horse team.

KEEGAN with two pack horses with kegs of water and a little oats and grub, went ahead. The tenderfoot, Palmer, asked to go with him and Keegan nodded. The two, Keegan on his half-Arab, the tenderfoot on a stout mustang, headed into the desert, leaving Virdlen and the others to follow with the wagon, heading for Cabeza Mountain.

"But how can you ever hope to find them?" asked Palmer.

"We'll find 'em," said Keegan confidently.

The rescued man, able to talk a little at the post, claimed that he had headed straight for the hammer-shaped peak directly north of Virdlen's post. Keegan doubted that; the man had been too far gone to travel a straight line. The wagons, he mumbled, were in camp below a cone-shaped hill. That was no help; the name Picachos came from the number of cone-shaped hills in a wilderness of valley and mountains where a thousand wagon trains could have been hidden.

Keegan was his old self, every sense alert, his mind working at top speed. He had an intimate knowledge of the desert and he knew all the possible routes the wagons could have been taking before the train got lost. Night fell, saw the pair climbing a peak that commanded a huge scope of country. There Keegan gathered desert brush—dead ironwood, old cactus trunks, and built a signal fire. He looked in vain for an answering flame.

"They're down in some canyon or behind some peak," he told Palmer, and rode on, every half hour firing his rifle twice, straining his ears for an answering signal.

Morning saw them moving into a blasting heat. Palmer was dubious; Keegan it seemed to him was traveling solely by guess. Yet that morning Keegan pointed

out a dead fire made by the man they had rescued.

"But how do you know it's the man we picked up?" asked Palmer.

"By the tracks," said Keegan impatiently. "Can't you see they're the same that fellow left? Now if I could only backtrack him—but over this country I might as well try to trail a sparrow."

Again Keegan rode a seemingly aimless course, but twice he pointed to tracks in the soft sand made by the man. And finally they came to the man's dead horse with vultures lifting from it.

Keegan climbed another peak to search the terrain with his spyglass, with no apparent result.

Palmer, near exhaustion, followed Keegan blindly as he cut another segment of country to stop at a tank filled with brackish water. They rested and fed their horses to take up the search again.

"It won't be long now," said Keegan. Palmer marvelled. Keegan seemed to have an intuitive knowledge of the actions of the people he was hunting. For two hours he rode at a swift pace, to come on a horrible sight: the stark naked body of a

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man, lying in a little dry creek bed where he had dug in a last effort to wrest water from the earth. Men, said Keegan, often tore off their clothing in the desert. After heaping sand and stones over the body, he rode on. He was firing his rifle at shorter intervals now and finally there came the faint echo of a gun.

Boone Keegan set off at once, turning to the left, climbing a ridge and dropping into a twisting little rocky canyon in which they saw the tattered canvas of the wagons.

The people lying in the shadow of the vehicles seemed only partly alive. They barely stirred as the horsemen came into camp, except for one woman who got to her knees to hold out her child in a mute appeal.

The two dismounted. "Careful with the water," Keegan ordered Palmer. "A spoonful at a time is all they can handle."

One woman revived enough to beg them to search for her husband who had gone off only the day before to hunt water.

"He's all right, ma'am," said Boone gently. "We found him." Telling her the whole truth now might be too much of a shock.

The horses had been fenced in up canyon and whickered pathetically as they caught the scene of water in the kegs on the pack horses.

"You take care of the people," Keegan told Palmer. "I'll dribble out a little water to the horses and drive 'em back to that tank."

The Easterner nodded and went on with his careful spooning out of the water. Keegan left with the horses, and putting them to graze on a little browse below the tank, he hurried to intercept the wagon from Virdlen's. By the next evening Virdlen had carried the rescued people to his post, and the wagons and teams were being brought on by Keegan and two other men.

The Easterner, Palmer, was gone when Keegan arrived. In a few days the wagon people moved on toward California, and Keegan forgot the incident.

Three weeks later Honest John Stocker rode into the fort bringing a San Francisco newspaper. "That fellow Palmer you guided around was a well-known New York editor out here on a vacation," he told Keegan. "He wrote up that trip you made to find those people. You know what that's going to mean?" Stocker went on jubilantly. "This will wipe out that wagon train massacre. This article is going to appear in that fellow's New York newspaper and every paper in the country. You're going to be more famous than Kit Carson. It's already meant the offer of a job I'll tell you about later. I want to talk to Tom a few minutes. Read this."

The story was on the first page, illustrated weirdly by an artist who plainly had never seen a desert. Palmer was a crack writer. He told of every step of the search for the wagon and in every step he made Boone Keegan a hero. A man who never missed a track on the desert floor, who by sheer skill had found a lost group of perishing people in a limitless desert.

Boone Keegan read the account, slowly and wonderingly. That fellow had remembered every detail all right, putting in the heat and the country and the dead man they had found, in a way to raise the hair on your head. But he had gone hog wild in making Keegan a hero. Keegan had done what any man with his training and experience could have done.

CHAPTER THREE

Wagons Into the Picachos

IT WAS not the first time Boone Keegan had saved people from death; the publicity meant nothing but embarrassment to him. He had saved one group of people; he had been unable to save the Dog Diggings miners. That should even the score; he could leave the country without being accused of running away. He wouldn't leave however, for two reasons.

One was the girl, Mary Emory, who had said she was going to see him hang for the murder of her brother. The other was the determination he still held to discover the perpetrators of the massacre. He would go back to the Ferry to make a real hunt, although apparently it was an almost hopeless job. No Dog Diggings dust had been reported which would seem to indicate that the raiders had left the country. Keegan had come to a stubborn belief, however, that they were still in the region, that the raid had been planned by established residents who knew the country, its people and Keegan, well. No band of

strangers could have engineered that raid.

Stocker came out from talking to Virdlen. "How does that read?" he asked, beaming. "Pretty good, eh? That'll show people what you really are, Boone, the man your friends know you to be. You know who brought that paper to me? An Easterner that wants to hire you to act as guide to a wagon train through the Picachos. His party came up the river in a steamer that landed their teams and wagons at Hale's Point."

Boone said, "I'm through with guiding wagon trains. Let them get someone like Ben Shuff."

"But it's your chance to come back," insisted Stocker. "Better grab it. Here's the setup on the job: Two young fellows, brothers from Illinois, been prospecting out West for five or six years. A year ago they dropped down into the south end of the Picachos, Pardo Canyon in the Little Madres. Hit rich gold ore. The brothers had a lot of relatives back in Illinois, farm people, and they brought out a few of 'em horseback to look the place over and stake claims. Result was the families decided to move out to work the claims. They've arrived with machinery and wagons and horses preparin' to live down there for a couple years. Brung their families and a few cows and pigs—they figure to pump water to irrigate for feed."

"A bunch of families going down in those God-forsaken Madres to live!" exclaimed Boone.

"Yeah. I don't blame 'em. Tom and I, we've seen some of the ore. It's rich, but there's not much of it. Those Illinois people took up the only worthwhile claims. They're at Hale's Point waiting for you to find a wagon road in for 'em. And that's your meat, knowing the Picachos like you do."

Keegan shook his head. "Worst time of the year to go in," he muttered. "Water holes drying up everywhere now. It'll be tough going. No wagon ever got within forty miles of the Madres."

"That just makes it the kind of hard job you like. About forty people all told—over half women and children. The head man, Parmenter, came up to the Ferry to find you; he asked me to get you to take the job. My advice is to grab it. I say that as a close friend of yours."

Keegan shook his head and then something changed his mind. Honest John Stocker's hazel eyes were burning. He had ridden the long miles from the Ferry to persuade Boone into taking a routine sort of job, when he could have sent word by a messenger. Why? A little tremor of excitement ran through Keegan. Some hunch was suddenly telling him to take the job, if for no other reason than that Honest John Stocker was urging him so strongly to take it.

He nodded. "I'll ride over to Hale's Point and talk it over with them," he agreed.

"Do that," advised Stocker eagerly. "I'd like to see you get on your feet again. You deserve a lot of pay for the dirty talk that's been spread about you. The head man is Parmenter; it was his two sons that made the strike."

The next day Keegan rode to see the Parmenter people. He found them camped by the river, getting their wagons ready for the desert journey. Eli Parmenter, the leader, was a tall, stern-faced man. He had been a captain in the war between the North and South. Six other men in the bunch had also fought in the war.

A few minutes' talk was enough to show Keegan that these people, while tenderfeet in the desert, were a capable bunch. They expected hardships, but they didn't mind them. They figured that in two years they could mine enough gold to provide independent fortunes for all the families.

What they needed was a wagon road not only to travel into the Madres on, but to use also in freighting supplies over the years. They wanted Keegan to establish such a road and act as guide for their train of fourteen wagons. Safety was more important than speed or shortness of route. With their families they could take no chances.

"I'll have to ride down first to scout the country," said Keegan. "There's a wagon route from here to Capitan Peak by way of the Tornillos, but beyond I'll have to make a rough survey for a road and make sure of water. I'll be back in a week."

He took a spare saddle horse and one pack animal, and rode out. He knew freighter wagons and the grades that teams could pull, the distances teams could travel in a day. Water holes and springs were

low. No matter what route they took there would have to be dry camps. Part of the journey, because of the excessive heat, would have to be made at night. He estimated the barrels of water needed to carry through the dry camps and rode to within thirty miles of the destination. The last miles across a hard-floored valley would be simple.

Satisfied finally as to the best route, he rode back to state his terms—a flat five hundred dollars. Parmenter accepted immediately.

"There'll be no trouble with Indians, I reckon," he said.

Keegan grinned. "Most Indians would need a guide themselves to get through that country. But you better keep your guns handy. You can expect anything in the Picachos, when you least expect it. And another thing, Parmenter, you might have been a captain in the Civil War, but you're a private on this trip. I give the orders until you fire me."

It was Parmenter's turn to grin. "As a captain, I took more orders than I gave. You're the boss, Keegan."

THE wagons rolled away, heading up a long grade to cross the first mountain range. There would be little reason for an attack on this train; the wagons carried little worth stealing, but Keegan had a hunch and was taking no chances. He kept a tight rein on the train. Both when moving and in camp, men were instructed to keep their rifles close at hand.

For the five days it took to Capitan Peak, they went along the rutted trail of freight wagons. From Capitan they turned south to make a new road over Capitan Mesa. The third day he and five men rode on ahead to blast a road down the escarpment made by the south wall. They returned to the camp by moonlight. Riding up with the others to the big fire used for general cooking, Keegan pulled back his horse suddenly to stare hard at one of the women.

"We have another member added to our party, gentlemen," explained Parmenter to the riders. "Miss Emory rode in today; she's going with us to teach school. Miss Emory, this gentleman is our guide, Boone Keegan."

The girl stared. Her mouth tightened and then she was saying, "How do you do?" in a cold voice.

"You have heard of Mr. Keegan, of course," went on Parmenter. "And how he found those people below Virdlen's post in the nick of time."

"I have heard of Boone Keegan," said the girl tonelessly. "And he's going to guide you folks through the Picachos?"

Keegan waited to hear her cry out that this was the man who had betrayed her brother, but she fell silent.

He unsaddled his horse and ate with the other men but an hour later when he saw her alone, just out of the zone of firelight, he walked over to her. "Why didn't you tell them?" he demanded. "They've never heard the story they tell about me at Stocker's Ferry."

The girl hesitated. "I don't know why I didn't tell them. Maybe it's that I've learned since I've come west that you can't believe everything that's told you, that snap judgments are usually wrong. I may have made a mistake in accusing you. If I did, I am sorry."

"Thanks," he said drily, thinking that he might have been lynched through her mistake. "Why did you join the Parmenters?"

"I heard that they wanted a school teacher," she said. "My money was gone. And I will not go back east until—"

"Until you see someone hanged for your brother's murder?" he asked.

"I heard in Stocker's Ferry that a few bets are being offered that this wagon train will not reach its destination," she said. "That might be a warning to you to be on the lookout."

"Or it might mean that I am arranging for my gang of cutthroats to come in and raid this train?"

"I don t know what it means," she said quietly. "But I am keeping still about you unless I see some sign of treachery. These men would kill you in a minute if they thought you were planning to betray them."

"I wouldn't blame 'em. Meanwhile you're keeping a sword over my head?"

"Look at it that way if you wish. I haven't made up my mind about you. If you were responsible for that raid, you're a very smart scoundrel. If not, you're a man that has been very much wronged by

unjust suspicions. I am trying hard to believe the latter of you, Mr. Keegan."

"Thanks," he said again. "I might say I told your brother's bunch to stay camped at Tornillo Well until I rode back. They went against my orders and it's claimed I sent them word to move on. That's a lie. I sent no word to them whatever. Of course I'm telling my side of the story; you can believe it or not. But you're right in one thing—the men responsible for that raid are very smart men."

The desert stretched limitlessly, broken by rocky ranges that raised forbidding barricades. A child wailed from a wagon, and Keegan who had piloted caravans through Indian country where every moment called for vigilance, was suddenly uneasy. So they were making bets at the Ferry that the Parmenter train would meet disaster. There should be no danger, but he was uncertain. Hanging over these people was some danger for which he could not find a shape.

Down the blasted-out roadway the wagons rolled the next day into a long valley where wheels sank deep in sand. Along with that came a baking heat such as these Easterners had never known. The sun blistered them, dust powdered their throats and lungs, but it did not affect their courage. No one, save the babies, complained.

Again they came to a mountain barricade, the Santa Ritas. They toiled for five days climbing through a pass, blasting, clearing huge boulders and building an incline off a cliff, drinking alkali water. They rested a day before going on and the day being Sunday the grave-faced Parmenter conducted services.

The next day with the wagons rolling again, Keegan was scouting ahead when his sharp eyes caught sight of a thin, all but invisible spiral of smoke some miles away. He circled until he came on the camp, to find Tom Virdlen with two men cooking a meal down a little ravine. He rode up on them quietly. The two men with Virdlen were hangers-on about the trading post.

"Hunting some stray horses," explained Virdlen, after a boisterous greeting. "How's your wagons getting along?"

"All right," said Keegan, but he was stirred by a sudden inner excitement. Virdlen was lying—he wouldn't be hunting stray horses this far from home. What he was here for was mixed with the same reason that had brought Virdlen's uncle, Honest John Stocker, hurrying down with the offer of the pilot job with the wagon train.

Virdlen grinned as he took Boone apart from the other men. "Course I'm not hunting horses," he said. "I'm just sashaying around. You know I saw those claims in Pardo Canyon and I haven't been able to forget 'em. I was thinking, suppose something happened to these folks on their way across the Picachos? It could happen easy—everybody knows this country is dangerous as a rattler in your bed."

"Maybe you figured to be around in case something happened to them?" asked Keegan.

Virdlen laughed. "That's about it. If this train was lost, I bet the two fellers holding down the claims would get discouraged and leave. That would throw the whole canyon open and the first ones in could grab the cream."

Keegan's face did not change. Here it was at last—what he had been waiting for. Virdlen was not coming out openly to offer a bribe but it was hinted below his light words—a bribe to guide the wagon train to destruction! And behind the offering was the same gang that had murdered the Dog Diggings miners in cold blood—Keegan would stake his life on it.

"How much are the Pardo Canyon claims really worth?" Boone asked.

Virdlen's eyes lit up. "I sneaked out some of that ore to have it assayed. There's a half million in free milling gold that's easy to get." Virdlen chuckled. "But of course nothing could happen to this wagon train, with you guiding it."

Keegan realized he should play along with Virdlen, lead the man on into a definite offer. Honest John Stocker, he guessed, had been anxious to get him the job of guide, figuring that Keegan was so bitter about his treatment after the Dog Diggings affair that he would fall in with a plan to lose the wagon train if the betrayal would net him enough money.

The anger in Keegan flared hot as the desert sun. "You're right," he told Virdlen. "Nothing is going to happen to a wagon train that I'm guiding—if I can help it."

Virdlen's eyes refused to meet Keegan's. The man shrugged. "Of course not," he agreed easily. "Well, we got to be riding back."

Keegan caught one of Virdlen's arms. "Yes, get back, Tom," he said grimly. "Ride out and stay away from my wagons or I'll shoot you on sight. When this job is done I'm looking up where you were during the Black Pass massacre. If I find you were mixed in it, I'll see you hang for it. You and Honest John Stocker both."

"You're making a big mistake, Boone," protested Virdlen, shaken. "You got me wrong. You know I wouldn't mix in anything like that Pass massacre." He was still protesting when Boone rode away.

FOR two days the wagons rolled on with Keegan staying in the saddle almost continuously. He had put the train on the same basis as one passing through hostile Indian country. Danger threatened, he knew, from the same gang that had trapped the Dog Diggings miners.

Keegan made a map of the remainder of the route, with its water holes and the mileage carefully estimated, together with various helpful land marks. This he gave to Parmenter.

"In case something happens to me," he explained. "And travel as if you were in Indian country. Guard your horses at night. Lose them and you're done for!"

Parmenter studied the map. "Looks like plenty of water," he said.

"Not a lot, said Keegan. "There never is. Usually not enough. Don't waste a drop."

Two more weary days went by for Keegan with his three-sided job of working out a trail, of watching for enemies and making sure of water, which lay like stepping stones across a quicksand bog. They would have to make a dry camp but Keegan figured to travel that night to reach Pinto Springs, a small pool holding barely enough water to water the train. He rode ahead to make sure that the water was still there and returned after dark to find the wagons in the dry camp he had selected. After a rest they would pull on, reaching Pinto Springs in mid-morning.

Parmenter and the other men looked at him queerly as he rode in, but he was hungry and paid no attention. While he ate, the men were unusually silent. Then as he drank his second cup of coffee, they closed in on him—a ring of men. Boone looked up. He had taken off his gunbelt and laid it aside. His rifle was in the saddle scabbard of the gray which he had saddled after riding in. He had made it a habit never to be in camp without a fresh horse ready for use.

Parmenter stepped closer. "We didn't look into your record, Keegan," he said. "And you didn't tell us some miners you were guiding to Stocker's Ferry were massacred, and their gold stolen."

"No," said Boone quietly. "I didn't tell you." He was wondering if Mary Emory had told Parmenter that story.

"Two men rode in today from Stocker's Ferry," went on Parmenter. "They said they'd learned you plan to lose us between water holes so your gang can jump our claims in Pardo Canyon. The same gang that killed and robbed the Dog Diggings miners."

So it had not been the girl who had told Parmenter; Boone was relieved at that. Somehow the half trust she had in him was worth more than the opinion of the whole Stocker's Ferry country.

"One of the men who came was a deputy sheriff," Parmenter continued sternly. "He's taking you back to stand trial for the murder of the miners. We shouldn't let him take you; we ought to put up a wagon tongue and hang you from it, Keegan. But we told him we'd tie you up for him. The other man that came is Ben Shuff, the scout. He's going to take us the rest of the way."

The men moved in a little closer. Keegan, looking at their set, grim faces knew they wouldn't even listen to him, let alone believe what he said. Again there flared up in him an uncontrollable anger.

"I didn't come to you hunting this job," he said. "You sent word to me. There is a gang that wants to get rid of you but I don't belong to it. Ben Shuff probably belongs to it. He'll see you don't get to Pardo Canyon. But you won't believe me. I hope you don't reach the canyon," he said. "To hell with you!"

Keegan could move like a striking snake. He drove a fist in one face in the ring around him; he kicked another man below the belly, to make a gap in the ring. Two

steps brought him to the back of the wagon from which he darted to the side of another wagon.

A few shots were fired after him, but the men, afraid of hitting someone of the families, were shooting high. The women about the wagons were screeching with fright. He dodged behind a third wagon which brought him to the temporary corral. Flipping up the reins of the gray, he flung himself into the saddle and the horse darted away like an arrow leaving the bow.

KEEGAN turned the horse behind two wagons in the outer circle just as two guns broke out savagely from a camp fire near the corral. He heard a loud yell and identified it as belonging to Ben Shuff, a long-haired guide who boasted of the number of Indians he had killed. The two guns, he knew, must belong to Shuff and the deputy sheriff, and they were shooting fast as Keegan headed into a little draw. The moon was not yet up and he gambled on the poor light. Just before he dipped below the bank of the wash, something struck through his sombrero, ploughing slantingly along the side of his head. Lifting his hand, he felt a trickle of blood and realized a bullet must have whipped along his skull.

He had ridden two or three miles when, thinking of Mary Emory and the various families in the train, he halted the gray. A hot desert breeze blew on him, and it seemed to him that on the same breeze came the faint wail of a child, one of the wagon train children. He remembered the woman of the lost wagons who had held up her child mutely begging water for it.

In the distance he could hear the sound of men's voices. Evidently the sound had carried far, magnified by some mountain wall. He rode in the direction of the voices, the gray padding softly over the soft arroyo bottom. After half a mile he heard the voices again, and then he caught the reflection of a small fire built behind the banks of the same arroyo. Leaving his horse, he approached on foot, rifle in the crook of his arm, pausing when finally he saw the fire and men about it. Saddle horses were standing nearby and several with packs. He counted the men. Six—ten—fourteen. Climbing the arroyo bank, he came closer to the camp. It was plainly not an overnight camp; the men were merely resting and preparing a meal. He identified Virdlen's laughter, a little high pitched. Closer, he identified the figures about the fire. He knew all but two as employees of Honest John Stocker—freighters, horse wranglers, roustabouts. The other two worked for Virdlen and were the same pair he had seen with the man several days before. Stocker was not with the group, which was not surprising. The store owner was too old for long desert rides and he was the sort who would let others do the active work while he did the scheming. The size of the party could mean but one thing: they had come to get rid of the Parmenter wagon train.

While Keegan was still crawling nearer the group, Virdlen began to douse the little fire. "Let's be riding," he called. "We'll have to swing way out around those wagons." Within ten minutes they were jogging toward the southeast, swinging out to by-pass the wagon train, which was just getting under way again for the night trek toward Pinto Springs.

BOONE KEEGAN trailed after the riders. The Virdlen party was evidently heading for Pinto Springs, also a pool of water under a high cliff. They reached it after three hours, a time which would be tripled by the slower wagon train. Halting at the springs, Virdlen's group watered their horses and made a fire for coffee. Again Boone left his horse to approach on foot, taking advantage of the scrub brush that grew about the springs. The moon was up and light enough to reveal two men emptying the contents of kegs into the pool of water.

Virdlen was using a long pole to stir the water as the stuff spilled into it. They waited a few minutes, then Virdlen said, "We'd better make sure it's all right. Where's that pup—"

A man produced a small mongrel dog, setting him down by the pool to drink. It was so still that Boone could hear the eager lapping of the animal's tongue. The men's talk stilled—they were watching the dog.

"The stuff don't take effect right away," said Virdlen, breaking the silence. "That way it'll give the whole outfit a chance to water before they suspect anything."

Suddenly the pup let out a sharp yelp, then began a pitiful whining which was suddenly stilled.

"Don't take long once it hits him," said Virdlen, with satisfaction. "Throw that pup back into the brush and we'll get out of here. The wind will wipe out our sign, and anyway that Parmenter bunch will be so thirsty time they get here they won't be noticin' tracks."

The men rode out, but Keegan guessed not far. They would camp and sleep, and be watching from some high point when the wagon train arrived, to see the effect of the poisoned springs.

Boon Keegan rode back on the route the wagon train would be taking toward the Springs. The effects of the shot which had grazed his head were gradually but steadily worsening. Occasional sharp bursts of pain brought him to a near nausea. It was going to be tough when the sun rose. Already the sky was paling, bringing on the slow dawn of the desert. He reeled in his saddle.

Some time later he came to, to find himself sitting in the saddle, his hands clamped on the horn and his horse stopped. The sun was up and blazing down on him. The landscape wavered and blurred before his eyes, and his head hurt as if the skull had been torn away, exposing his naked brain. But he held one clear thought—the wagon train was heading for Pinto Springs, to rush in there to gulp down poisoned water—horses and people both. He shivered at what would happen. People weren't civilized. What was in men like Stocker and Virdlen that made them sell their immortal souls for yellow metal?

The gray moved on of his own accord. Keegan could not open his eyes, but after a time he thought he heard a voice. Strangely it sounded like his mother's soft one. The gray stopped and waited. Then came the thud of hoofs. Keegan pulled the rifle from its scabbard and forced his eyes open to see Mary Emory riding up to him, holding out a canteen of water. He managed to keep from grabbing it and draining it, taking instead a few swallows to screw the cap back on.

"They thought you had been hit," she said. "I rode to look for you last night but I didn't find you."

"You rode to look for me?" he repeated. "Where's the train?"

She nodded her head. "Over the ridge. I've been riding the tops of ridges hoping I'd see you."

"Queer," he said, "that you should try to find me, when you think I killed your brother."

"I think nothing of the kind," she stated. "I know now that you had nothing to do with that. And I know you weren't plotting against the wagon train. After they accused you of that, I no longer had any doubts about you; I knew all the other stories about you were untrue."

It was like a woman, he thought, to come to believe in him when the evidence seemed strongest against him.

"I followed Virdlen and a bunch of men last night," he told her. "They've ruined Pinto Springs up ahead—poured three kegs of some kind of poison in it. The poison was strong enough to kill a puppy that lapped up a little water. Got to keep the wagon train from going there. They'll have to swing south now for the Green Tanks, under the Tres Hermanas peaks."

"But they're expecting to reach water this morning," she said. "It's been so hot the barrels are almost dry."

"They'll have to turn toward Green Tanks," he insisted. "You see those three sister mountains below? The tanks are under the middle peak. You got no time to lose." He raised the rifle he still held. "Hurry. Turn those wagons south."

"There'll be trouble when you ride in," she warned him, "although the deputy left to ride back to the Ferry. They all look on you as an enemy. Shuff has been filling them with wild stories about you."

He shrugged off the trouble. What was important was turning the wagon train.

CHAPTER FOUR

Desert Siege

THEY climbed the ridge and he focused his eyes against the burning glare. Rising from the smooth white surface of the playa below was the white powdery dust of the wagon train. Descending the ridge they dropped into a steep-walled little wash which snaked along the valley toward the moving wagons. They rode along this until they were close enough to hear the creak of the wheels and just then a rider suddenly

came around a sharp turn in the wash—the lanky scout, Ben Shuff, riding with his long-barreled rifle over his saddlehorn, a habit of Shuff's. The surprise of seeing Keegan made him jerk his horse to a stop. He looked startled; he must have been expecting to meet men from the Virdlen group.

"You, Keegan!" he called, and raised his rifle. "Damn you, I always wanted to kill you."

Keegan was still carrying his rifle. It was rifle against rifle, at a distance of forty yards. Shuff, in his hurry, did not lift his weapon to his shoulder to aim, but snapped a shot from his hip which went wild. Keegan fired only an instant later but he had first coolly lined the man in his sights. Shuff dropped his rifle, and after swaying in the saddle a moment, fell to the sandy floor of the wash.

Keegan had aimed at the man's right shoulder and his shot had gone true. He and the girl rode up to the injured man, who lay groaning with the pain of the smashed shoulder. They had barely dismounted when hoofs hammered from the direction of the wagons. Parmenter and two other men rode down into the wash, faces grim, guns in hand.

"Shot our scout, did you?" said Parmenter. "We'll hang you this time, Keegan, to keep you from getting away."

"He shot in self defense," said the girl quickly. "He's been scouting for the train even after you drove him off. He trailed some men who poisoned Pinto Springs last night. Shuff's the one you should hang. His gang sent him here to take Keegan's place and he's taking you to springs that he knows are poisoned."

Shuff, holding his shoulder, sat up and snarled, "It's a lie. No springs been poisoned. If they was, Keegan did it."

"I suppose he rode off last night with enough poison in his pockets to poison a pool of water," the girl remarked jeeringly.

Parmenter and the others were shaken. Parmenter turned to the girl. "Mary Emory, what do you know about this Keegan?" he demanded.

"I know he had nothing to do with the Black Pass massacre," she stated. "And I know your only chance is to do what he says—turn south."

"If you don't believe me, you can find out for yourselves easy enough," Boone told

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them. "Ride ahead and take a chicken or a dog with you. Let it drink the water, then wait a few minutes. Your only chance is to turn south and head for the Green Tanks under those three peaks. The water is poor but there's too much of it to poison."

"My God, man," said Parmenter. "Our water is gone. The horses haven't had a drop since yesterday morning! They can't go much farther. Keegan, how can we believe you? And what's all this about? What do these men want from us?"

"They want what they claimed I wanted —your gold claims. They wanted me to go in with them and when I didn't, they sent Shuff and that deputy in to get rid of me. Send someone ahead to test the spring. It might be dangerous, though, if they're watching the place."

They carried Shuff to the wagons and bandaged his shoulder. The train halted. Two men were sent riding south, one carrying a rooster in a sack slung to his saddlehorn. Meanwhile a guard was kept over Keegan. Lying in the shade of a wagon, he slept deeply. When he awoke, the pain in his head was almost gone.

In two hours the men were back. They had seen nothing of Virdlen's men, who perhaps had been taking a siesta. They flung the dead rooster on the ground. "He fell over ten minutes after he drunk the water," reported one of the men.

They looked at Ben Shuff, leaning back against a wagon wheel, and the wounded man shrank away from them. "I tell you I don't know nothin' about it," he maintained.

Boone took the six-shooter Parmenter had just returned to him and pointed it at Shuff. "Come through," he ordered harshly. "Talk."

Shuff, between the agonizing torture of his shattered shoulder and the tremendous heat, went to pieces. "Don't shoot," he begged. "I had nothin' to do with poisoning those springs. Virdlen did it and Stocker schemed it out. I told 'em it wasn't human, but I had to do what Stocker said; he's holdin' something over my head—a old charge that I stole mules from the Army."

"And it was Stocker and Virdlen that rigged up the deal to kill those miners in the Pass?" asked Boone Keegan.

Shuff nodded. "They rigged it up. They sent that fellow Tule out with word to the miners for the wagons to move on, and they had Tule tell it around the Ferry that you'd sent him out. Then they had Tule killed to shut his mouth."

KEEGAN was again the leader of the expedition. When the shortened train moved out, he pointed the way, riding ahead with five men who worked to clear the new routes of boulders or to break down banks into inclines the wagons could roll down.

"Virdlen and his men—they'll be waiting for us at the Tanks?" asked Parmenter.

Keegan nodded. "They'll see by our dust that you found out about the poisoned water and turned off. They'll figure there's just one chance to stop you."

"By keeping us from reaching water?"

Keegan nodded again. "If you want water, I think you'll have to fight for it."

Changing teams often, they moved on steadily until sunset, to camp a few hours. The horses were suffering from thirst; the cattle kept up a constant lowing. Even the people were suffering, for Keegan had rationed their little remaining water. They would have a fight to reach the Tanks, and fighting was thirsty work.

At a late night halt, they lightened their wagons again, to save the roses. Two more wagons were left behind, and with the exhausted teams driven as a bunch, the train went on through the moonlight, wheels banging over rocks, armed men riding on the flanks of the vehicles.

The dawn, with the stars and moon fading, came slowly as the wagons crawled along a wide wash which climbed toward the base of the middle of the three peaks called Tres Hermanas. The exhausted horses that pulled the vehicles were barely moving. In the bottom of one barrel a little water slopped about—all that remained for the people of the train.

A half mile from the Tanks, from one of the ridges bordering the wash, a man sent a hail. He wanted to talk, he called, and Parmenter yelled back for him to ride up. It was a man from the Ferry who looked after Stocker's freighter mules. He rode up jauntily and grinned a little as he studied the worn faces of the men.

"Who's in charge here?" he demanded arrogantly.

Boone had ridden off to scout the water

hole and Parmenter stepped up to the man.

"I was sent here to make an offer," the man said. "Letting you folks come up to the Tanks to get water for a half interest in the Pardo Canyon claims. We'll go in with you as pardners to mine that ore."

"We'll see you all hanged for poisoning Pinto Springs," returned Parmenter.

"Don't know nothin' about that," said the man, "but I'm talking cold turkey on water. We got a army of men down there holding the Tanks. All nice and cozy behind a rock barricade. You folks are needin' water bad. None of you will get out of here alive if you don't make terms with us."

Parmenter's hand dropped to his holstered six-shooter. He ground his teeth. "I ought to drive those words back in your throat with a bullet," he growled. "Ride on back before I do it."

The man read the menace in Parmenter's voice and turned hastily to ride away. "It's your funeral," he called back over his shoulder.

Keegan returned a little later and was told of the offer. He had the wagons pulled into a circle; it was barely possible Virdlen's bunch might make a surprise attack.

HE HAD visited the Tanks several times over the years. The pools, a series of them, lay in a narrow rocky wash under low cliffs. He had been able to ride close enough to see that Virdlen had piled rocks across the wash fifty yards above the pools to make a wall behind which riflemen could lay. The men's horses were down the canyon.

By a long circling detour over the flank of the peak, Keegan figured he could get a party of men in to the low cliffs behind the pool. He picked five of the younger men. Parmenter and the others meanwhile were to start an attack, moving slowly down the wash, keeping the Virdlen men behind the barricade occupied.

Keegan and his five climbed from the draw and sweated their way up through clawing brush to get to the top of a ridge. Gun fire had broken out below as Parmenter and the others were moving down the wash in a slow advance. Virdlen's men from behind the boulder barricade kept up a regular bombardment; evidently they had cartridges to burn.

On the mountain, Boone's party panted upward in the intense heat over a washboard of little side canyons, swearing as they pushed through thorn thickets. From under shady shelters, rattlesnakes buzzed warnings. In an hour, soaked with perspiration, they slid down to the rim of the low cliffs back of the pools, to look down on the wash where rifles made a ragged din and burnt powder smoke lifted through the heated air.

The Parmenter group was still firing fast from cover of huge boulders which littered the floor of the wash above the barricade, but the gun battle apparently was a stalemate.

It had been Keegan's idea to wrap cloths about the rifle barrels to keep off the sun. They removed these now and began a cautious descent toward the pools which must have been named Green Tanks because of their uninviting covering of green scum. Despite the scum the brackish water meant life to the families waiting at the wagons and it was life for which the wagon people were fighting.

One of Virdlen's men was down in a deep depression by the pool cooking a meal, indifferent to the occasional bullets which sailed over his head. Keegan, rifle in his hand, eased himself along a trough worn in the rock by freshets over the centuries. Directly below him the green pool was not over three feet deep. The man cooking looked up to see Keegan plummet from a ledge to land in the water. Hastily the man grabbed up a rifle, but one of the Keegan party, left on the rim of the low cliff, promptly shot the man through the heart. He toppled and fell by the side of his greasewood fire. Behind Keegan four other men quietly plopped into the pool; the other was to remain on the cliff overlooking the wash.

The sound of the shot which had killed the cook caught the attention of the men at the barricade. They saw the last of Keegan's party dropping into the pool and turned hastily to open fire. Kneeling in the water, under cover of the rocky rim of the pool, Keegan and the four got their rifles into action.

Shocked by this attack from their back, the Virdlen men emptied their guns repeatedly, concentrating their shots on Keegan in

(Continued on page 93)

That Horse-Happy Frosty!

As the irate Chick Parkinson told Acting Sheriff Brownie: "When a man does you a favor, he's maybe your friend. But when that same redhead steals my horses, he's headin' for a fast hangin'! I got the rope; you got the badge. An' all we need is Frosty Starret!"

HAVING made an extensive study of crime and criminals, as had Deputy Frank Brown, it was no news to him that a woman was often the downfall of the wayward sons of the twisted trails. However, being no longer a deputy sheriff, but a full-fledged acting sheriff during Sheriff Bradford's absence, it behooved him to take all clues seriously—even to the extent of running down Frosty Starret. But that still didn't explain why that long-legged, ugly redhead with a fondness for other men's horses should fall in love with a hard-eyed gal like Polka Kate. Above all it failed to explain Frosty's letter to Sheriff Bradford telling of his burning love. For that piece of gigantic stupidity there was no explanation.

If Sheriff Bradford hadn't been out of the county on a well-earned vacation, that letter would have been traced down and both Frosty Starret and Polka Kate would have been in the pokey by now. But fortunately for Frosty, the sheriff was gone and Frank Brown was a little slower to act where the red-headed horse fancier was concerned.

The fact remained, though, that right now Frank Brown was sheriff. He had been for two weeks. And during that two weeks the Alturas stage had been held up twice, a shotgun guard had been filled full of lead, and Frosty Starret had decided to stretch his own neck by writing letters to the sheriff telling of his love life. Acting Sheriff Frank Brown was fast coming to the decision that a deputy sheriff led a much more simple life. There were no decisions to make.

Since receiving the letter, Brownie had stalled for three days, making no move. Maybe Frosty had fallen off a rock and hit his head. Maybe Frosty knew Sheriff Bradford was away—although that was unlikely—and was just trying to have some fun with Brownie. At any rate, maybe if he just ignored the whole thing and continued to devote full time to worrying about the stage hold-ups without clues, this Frosty Starret thing would blow over. His muddled thoughts were complicated further by the appearance of Chuck Parkinson in the doorway of the office.

Chuck had a face that could be read a mile away. It was easy to read now. He was mad.

Chuck, who ran the Circle C and had an easy offhand way of bellying up to trouble without warning, came right to the point as was his custom. He said, "Brownie, when a man does a favor for me, he's my friend. When he steals my horses, he's a horse thief and should be strung up. Unless you get that dad-blamed, disjointed, bow-legged, horse-stealin' skunk in here within the next two days, me and my boys will. And we won't be gentle. Good-by, Sheriff. If you need any help, just call on me. I never forget a friend until he turns on me, then I don't waste time!"

There hadn't been any names mentioned, but Brownie had listened to similar descriptions of his slippery pal before. He took Chuck's arm, eased him into a chair by tripping him, then with his hand resting on the butt of a .44 suggested that the Circle C owner go into more detail.

"I ain't denying you lost some horses," Brownie said soothingly. "I can tell that just by looking at you. But what makes you so sure it was Frosty?"

Chuck Parkinson blew a disgusted snort across the desk. "Do you know anyone else who would take the time to cull over the string, take only the best, stop by the cook shack and lift a dozen cans of beans, then ride off without leaving a track?"

No, Brownie admitted, he didn't know anyone but Frosty Starret who could do that. But why would Frosty pick on Chuck Parkinson? He had always liked Chuck. Unless, as Brownie was fast beginning to suspect, Frosty had finally gone off his nut.

Brownie soothed the Circle C owner in as

friendly a way as the circumstances would permit—threatening to string him up if he dared take the law in his own hands. He made a bunch of promises he had little intention of keeping, and when he forcefully ushered Chuck out the door, he sat down to think.

Chuck's last words were, "I know how you feel about Frosty, kid, but friend or no friend, he's gonna dance on air for this! I expect fast action."

The Citizen's Committee also expected fast action on these stage hold-ups, too, Brownie thought ruefully. So he made the decision he had known for years he would some day have to make. Frosty Starret was a no-good, horse-stealing, son of a gun and it was time to run him in for keeps. He sighed deeply, strapped on two guns, jammed his hat down on his head, locked the door of the office and sauntered over toward Joe's place down the street. He was going to have a word or so with Polka Kate, who had suddenly become the light of Frosty Starret's life, if Brownie was to believe the letter the old half-wit had brought in from the hills.

ON THE way over he stopped for a second at the little pasture next to the jail, to say hello to Sheriff Bradford's big pinto. The horse had done nothing but eat ever since the sheriff had gone on his vacation. Eat and look longingly at the jail, wishing for company.

That, too, was part of Brownie's job—seeing that the horse didn't get lonesome. Sheriff Bradford had been very insistent

A lump formed in Brownie's throat as he smelled the burning cloth. . . .

By THOMAS THOMPSON

about that. Brownie hesitated now, spoke to the animal, rubbed his nose, then went on to Joe's.

Joe's place was about as usual. There was a fist fight going on in the middle of the room and Joe had both music boxes playing full blast to drown out any noise that might attract the law. When he saw Brownie, Joe was all smiles, called for the bartender to give the sheriff anything in the house, then angled Brownie off toward the door. Brownie pulled loose, separated the fighters by two well placed taps on the head with his gun barrel, came back and took the proffered drink.

Joe clucked his tongue against his teeth. "I didn't see them," he apologized, jerking his thumb toward the two prostrate gladiators who were now sitting up, shaking their heads as the bartender sloshed them with a bucket of water.

Brownie assured Joe that it was all right —that being dark in here it was no wonder he had missed seeing the fight. Which thoughtful explanation put Joe in a mellow mood and right in line for the next question Brownie shot him!

"Where's Polka Kate?"

Joe was expansive. Polka Kate wasn't down yet. She slept late every morning. She was a good girl, Kate. The men liked her songs. Fine girl. Is she in trouble?

"No," Brownie drawled, "she's not. But her boy friend sure as hell is!"

"Boy friend?" Joe echoed. "Don't tell me she's got one. One rule of mine is that the girls don't fall in love, see? It affects their work. Who is he?"

"You mean you don't know?"

There was no mistaking the sincerity in Joe's voice. "I don't know nothing about it," he said. "The girls are supposed to serve drinks, have the boys buy them a little tea now and then, sing a few songs, do a dance. . . . But boy friends? Believe me, Sheriff, this is news and I won't have it. If Polka Kate has a boy friend and he's in trouble, let me know who he is and I'll personally help you run him down!"

"That's fine, Joe," Brownie said, clapping the saloon owner on the back. "Polka Kate's boy friend is Frosty Starret."

That the complexion of the situation had suddenly changed as far as Joe was concerned was immediately apparent. He dragged out a handkerchief and started mopping his forehead. Then he motioned to a chair at one of the tables, called for a bottle, and invited Brownie to set. Over two quick drinks he explained that he had never lost a horse. Never owned a horse, in fact. And besides that, the Circle C boys were the best customers he had and they all liked Frosty Starret.

Then Brownie dropped his second bomb shell. "It was Chuck Parkinson who come in to file the complaint," he said.

Joe had to have three more quick ones to help him over that one. Then he cocked one eye and said, "Brownie, you've been a good friend to me. If you'll keep my name out of it I'll tell you the whole story."

Brownie leaned forward. "Yes, Joe?"

"Polka Kate has been acting funny."

"Go on, Joe."

"That's all. She's been acting funny."

Brownie snorted. "Of course, you muckle head," he said pleasantly, "any girl in love acts funny. Don't you know that?"

"Is that so?" Joe said, rubbing a finger reflectively along his cheek. "Maybe that's why that girl in Dallas threw that butcher knife at me. . . ."

"The hell with the girl in Dallas," Brownie yelled. "You get Polka Kate down here quick and let me talk to her."

"Sure, Brownie," Joe said softly. "Sure." But he made no move to go. Instead he sat there, studying the bottle and talking half to himself. "So that's where she goes when she sneaks out early and don't come back until after sun-up. Out to see Frosty. By golly, I thought Frosty could do better than that. That Kate is a hard customer. She'd as soon cut your throat as look at you." Aloud, and to Brownie, he said, "That girl in Dallas was like that. . . ."

"Hang the girl in Dallas!" Brownie bellowed.

"They did," Joe said morosely, and he helped himself to another drink.

Brownie got to his feet. He'd go up stairs and drag Polka Kate out by the hair, if necessary. He'd choke her into telling him where Frosty Starret was hiding out, and for the stealing of Chuck Parkinson's horses Frosty would get a rope where it would do the most permanent good.

He had a lot of other things to figure out, but he didn't have a chance right then. The Alturas stage rattled into town and from

the quick lifting of voices, Brownie knew something was wrong. He hurried outside with the others and saw two men lifting the driver off the seat. The old man's shirt was soaked with blood.

The driver had lost a lot of blood but otherwise he was not in serious shape. They took him over to the jail and made a bed for him on one of the cots. After the doc got through with him Brownie sent the others out and went in to get the facts of the case.

There were about twelve in the gang, the old man said. They caught him right at Kentnor Pass and he didn't have a chance. Had his hands in the air, and the express box with the bank's currency shipment was already off the stage when one of them decided to plug him, he said.

Which all made interesting listening, seeing as how it was the third time it had happened. But the thing that Brownie kept mulling over was the driver's repeated assertion that the outlaws were riding Circle C horses.

BROWNIE left the old man with an admonition to get some sleep, after extracting a promise that nothing be said about the Circle C horses. Then he went in and plopped down in the swivel chair in front of Sheriff Bradford's desk. There was a nasty lump forming in the pit of his stomach and his hands shook a little when he made a cigarette. A few minutes before he had been ready to hang Frosty Starret. He was still ready to hang him. But this time it was different. This time he was serious.

It seemed to explain a lot of things, those Circle C horses. He had been baffled to think that Frosty would steal from Chuck, but he had been just as baffled that Frosty would take that much stock. Not that Frosty Starret was above walking off with a horse. That fact was well established. But usually it was one horse—or at the most, two—and they had to be special horses or belong to someone who Frosty figured could spare a good horse. Never before had he deliberately gone into a ranch and taken a whole string. But of course if he had a place to sell them right quick—an outlaw band, for example. . . .

Stage robbers were always in need of fresh horses and they were usually ready to pay a good price. It all made sense, but it still made Brownie sick. He had been told often enough, but he had never really believed that Frosty would turn all bad.

Brownie spent the rest of the afternoon figuring out how he would go about his unpleasant task. That he must bring Frosty in was sure. With Frosty treading air at the end of a rope he could probably worm out the identity of the stage robbers, bring them in and be a hero. But with Frosty on a rope it would be an empty victory. His mind kept going back to Polka Kate, and finally he decided she was his ace in the hole.

With Frosty in a mess as serious as this, Brownie knew he couldn't walk up on the redhead in the open the way he had a dozen times in the past. This time it was lawman against outlaw, and no punches pulled. He'd have to track Frosty down and come a-shooting, for he knew the redhead well enough to know that once he turned he'd go whole hog. Brownie filled his cartridge belt, adjusted his two guns to where he wanted them, and went over to Joe's.

Sheriff Bradford's big pinto spotted him and nickered for attention. Brownie said, "You go to hell, too!"

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He sat at a table in the far corner of Joe's place and listened to the criticism that swirled around him. Polka Kate seemed a little nervous, Brownie thought, but she kept up a front and had a smile for anyone who needed it. Every time she smiled, Brownie thought of a panther and tried to figure out what it was Frosty could see in her. Sure, she was good looking—but so is a bull cobra. The girl had dynamite written all over her.

He lost sight of her along about midnight and when he looked at Joe, the saloonman winked and nodded his head toward the back door. It was the signal they had arranged, and Brownie let himself out the front way, trying to attract as little attention as possible.

Once outside, he made a run for the stable where he kept his buckskin. Of Pete, the one-eyed livery man who watched the place at night, Brownie asked if anyone had just taken a horse. Pete rolled his cud, thought for a while, then shook his head. Brownie fished in his pocket and brought out a ten-dollar bill. Waving it under Pete's nose, he said, "Did a girl just take out a horse, Pete?"

Pete eyed the bill, thought some more, then said, "Come to think of it there was a girl in here. She took that little black mare Mel Straight used to own—"

"Which way did she go?" Brownie interrupted.

Pete reached out for the bill, stopping his hand half way. Brownie handed it over and Pete spat a long stream of brown juice into the moldy hay on the floor. Jerking his thumb over his shoulder he indicated the road back into the hills. "That away," he said.

Brownie didn't wait for further directions. Catching up the buckskin he tossed on a saddle and lit out toward the hills. The girl didn't have much of a start, but it would be a little while before the moon was up and trying to trail anyone in that back country in the middle of the night was a hopeless job. He wanted to catch sight of her before she got off the road and into the hills.

For the first mile or so he rode at a gallop, then he slowed to a walk, straining his ears for any sound that might betray her presence. He was beginning to think he had lost her when he saw a horse and rider crossing an open space about a half mile ahead. Sinking his spurs he risked a burst of speed until he topped a rise where he could make sure. The light was faint, but he was fairly positive it was Mel Straight's black mare and more positive that the rider was a girl. After that he settled down to thinking of the work at hand, and the feeling it gave him was not a good one.

IT WAS around two in the morning when he lost the girl. He had been keeping close, twisting further and further into the hills. For a second he had dozed in his saddle and when he opened his eyes she was gone. He speeded up, then realized it would do no good. The trail forked three ways, and there was no way of telling which trail she had taken.

Cussing himself for his foolishness, he dismounted and ground-tied the buckskin. Then on foot he worked his way up a low ridge, hoping to get sight of Polka Kate. He didn't, but what he did see made his hair stand on end.

Directly below him in a box canyon was a camp. There was one big fire and a couple of small ones. And as if to tease him the moon came up and showed a dozen horses and as many men. One of those horses was the black that once belonged to Mel Straight. He couldn't be sure, but the rest looked suspiciously like that Circle C quarter horse stock. Brownie made some unrestrained observations about horse stealing and felt a gun center on his back bone. A low voice drawled, "Them's my sentiments exactly, son!"

Brownie's first reaction was to whirl around and try to land a fist on the gunman's chin, but two things held him back. One was that the gun felt as big as a canon. The other was, that the voice belonged to Frosty Starret.

Ordinarily Brownie might have softened a little, but he had steeled himself to the task ahead so he figured he might as well make his position clear. He said, "Frosty, this is it. You've got the drop on me now and if you don't want to swing, you better pull that trigger and get it over with. I'm taking you in if you don't, and there won't be no talking me out of it. Wholesale horse stealing and stage robbing ain't funny."

Brownie felt the pressure of the gun lessen and heard the weapon drop into its holster. Frosty came around to where Brownie could see him, and the deputy drew both guns. The grin on Frosty's face faded when he saw the weapons. "What is this?" he demanded, and there was an unfamiliar brittleness in his voice. "Is this any thanks for tipping you off to the biggest haul you ever made?"

"Maybe you didn't rob the stages yourself," Brownie said, thumbing back the hammers of his guns. "But selling horses to them is just as bad. Shuck that gun, Starret!"

Frosty made no move to comply with the request. His face was twisted in a puzzled frown, then it broke into a grin. "You didn't get the letter," he said.

"Of course, I got your letter," Brownie answered. "How else would I know to follow the girl? And for a man who usually don't want to see the law, that was the craziest stunt I ever heard. Especially when you figured on going into big scale horse stealing and stage robbing."

Frosty was nodding his head now, as if a bright light had suddenly been thrown on his mind. "You didn't read it," he said accusingly. "I didn't expect *you* to see through it but I figgered Bradford would. . . ."

"Bradford is out of town," Brownie said. "I'm the sheriff."

"Too bad," Frosty said. "If I had known that I would have drawn you pictures instead."

"I asked you to shuck that gun," Brownie reminded.

Frosty went on as if he hadn't heard. "Didn't you read where I said I was planning to *stage* a weddin'? Then I said I would *hold up* until I heard from you? And didn't I say *a man couldn't go wrong following Polka Kate?*"

"And you said a lot of other love stuff," Brownie reminded. His voice was a little high-pitched now, for he was gradually getting the idea he had missed something in that letter.

"I would have come right out and told you in plain language, only I wasn't sure of that old half-wit who took the letter in for me. I got an idea he's helping feed Cass Trackett and his gang. Which reminds me —did you bring any grub?"

Brownie didn't answer. His guns were sagging in his hands and he was taking another look at the camp below. Cass Trackett was only a name to him—a name on a printed dodger. But it was a name that had five thousand dollars written in big letters under it.

"Frosty, I had no idea," Brownie began. Then to save himself he roared, "But you stole Chuck Parkinson's horses!"

"I borrowed them," Frosty corrected. "After you refused to take my tip and come out here and get the Cass Trackett gang red-handed, I had to do something that would arouse a man with more sense than is usually found in sheriff's offices. I had a bull by the tail and couldn't let loose—and I was gettin' tired o' canned grub. So I picked on Chuck Parkinson. Ain't a more hot-headed gent in the valley than Chuck." His voice took on a mournful note. "Only trouble is, Cass found out where I was keeping the horses and stole 'em from me, the dirty rustler!"

Brownie was convinced. He wanted to hear no more. Here were his stage robbers sitting there in the valley like ducks in a pond. He hardly heard Frosty's explanation that Polka Kate was look-out for the Cass Trackett gang—that she was the one tipping them off when there would be money on the stage. He had other things to think of. "Hold 'em here, Frosty," he sputtered. "Don't lose sight of 'em. I'll go to town and get the dangedest posse that ever rode the hills!"

"I will if you promise to bring me a dozen cans of beans," Frosty propositioned.

IT ALL happened so quick it was hard to tell who fired the shot, but the fact that a hand had suddenly pushed Brownie aside and the bearded man with the rifle was sinking to his knees left little doubt. Frosty Starret blasted once more with his smoking gun when the rifleman tried to raise his weapon. Then the reaction came, and Brownie stood there shaking while the twin shots rumbled back and forth through the hills and the camp in the canyon became a beehive. The voices of the outlaws carried as if they were six feet away, and from their words Brownie knew they were spotted. There was the sound of men crashing through brush as Frosty and Brownie

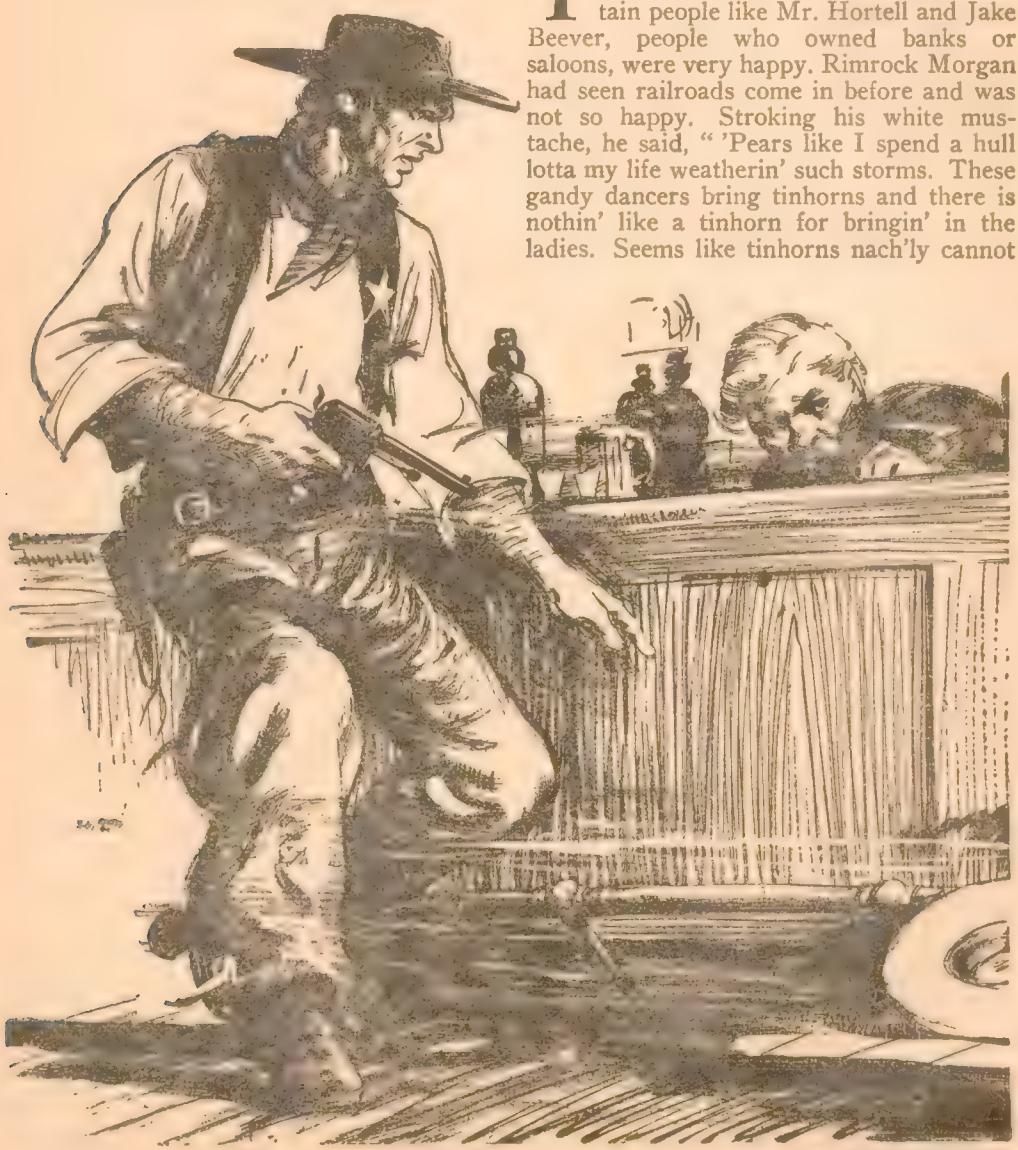
(Continued on page 96)

THE STEEL RAIL INVASION

CHAPTER ONE

Steel Rails and Iron Men

Jack moved back, keeping one side to his opponents, watching Post die.



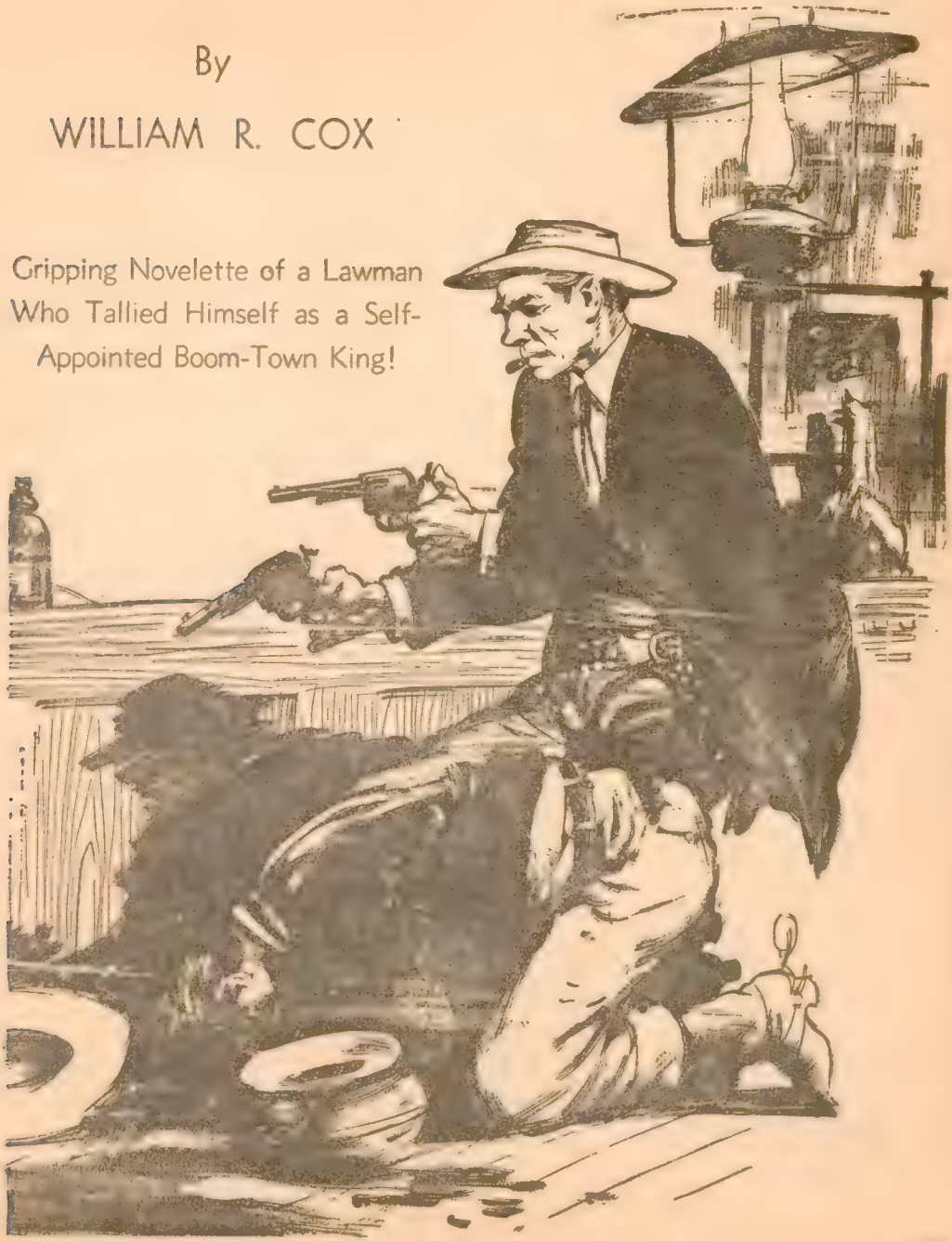
THE RAILROAD had to come to the town of Hatchet and naturally certain people like Mr. Hortell and Jake Beever, people who owned banks or saloons, were very happy. Rimrock Morgan had seen railroads come in before and was not so happy. Stroking his white mustache, he said, " 'Pears like I spend a hull lotta my life weatherin' such storms. These gandy dancers bring tinhorns and there is nothin' like a tinhorn for bringin' in the ladies. Seems like tinhorns nach'ly cannot

Would the Westering rails bring to the little cowtown a new era of prosperity—or an invading horde of tinhorns, crooks and killers. . . . Against which neither old Rimrock Morgan's wisdom nor Marshal Jack Rowe's gun-magic could hope to win?

By

WILLIAM R. COX

Gripping Novelette of a Lawman Who Tallied Himself as a Self-Appointed Boom-Town King!



git along 'thout ladies. And where there is ladies, you got trouble."

Mr. Hortell stroked his goaty little beard, said pontifically. "Waal, Hatchet ain't exackly a church town nowadays. But we ain't never cottoned to—uh—ladies like Rawhide means."

"I won't hire a one," said Jake Beever. His mustache was brown and the ends spiked out and people said he used wax on it. He was a very virtuous saloonkeeper. He operated honest tables and played in his own poker game, sometimes losing as much as ten dollars. "I never run no honkytonk and I ain't startin' now, on account of no railroad."

Rimrock said drily, "I jest wanted you boys to make sure of your marshal, thass all. The railroad'll send in a man to sort of look after their end, and you got to have a city marshal who can stand up to anyone. I nominate Jack Rowe—and yuh better take him."

The citizens of Hatchet would have raged at the suggestion that they took orders from old Rimrock Morgan, owner of the Triple M, but in affairs where it was of primary importance to protect the town and their interests therein, he generally suggested—and was obeyed. Jack Rowe was duly sent for and presented with a five-pointed star of office. They had to get Jack off Rimrock's south range, where he was strawbossing Triple M's round-up crew, and he was not sure he liked the idea, but Rimrock gave him the evil eye and he mumblingly took the oath of office.

Thereupon Rimrock Morgan went back to the ranch and the citizens eagerly awaited the influx of the railroad workers and hangers-on, rubbing their itching palms. Jack Rowe, breaking in on the job, arrested Pedro Anazano for cutting his wife's cousin to ribbons and the two played coon can in the jail for a week, until the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of self defense, winding up about even and with mutual respect and some affection. Jack sent Pedro out to the Triple M where the cousin's kinfolk dared not seek reprisal and Rimrock gave him a job. Then the railroad people came.

It was rough. Jack Rowe was young and big and strong. In all that county, no one could shoot straighter with a Colt than Jack. His fists were heavy and hard and his ability to carry his liquor a by-word. But the railroaders really kept him busy.

In the foreground was Bull Whipple. In a short time all Jack's troubles seemed to be centered in this man, a huge fellow with beetling brows and a protruding lower jaw. He was a gambler. He had a blonde wife and she was small and quiet, dressed in the simplest of gingham gowns, kept in a cabin Bull Whipple rented.

This Mrs. Whipple was first-named Daisy and in no time Mrs. Hortell, Mrs. Beever and others had taken her up. She was very pretty and in her sunbonnet, working in a patch of garden she had started immediately upon her arrival, she looked like nothing so much as a small child. Jack Rowe boarded down the street from the cottage, at Miz Weevil's, and every time he went by he naturally passed the time of day with Mrs. Whipple. . . . Daisy, that is.

The railroaders had not been content with Jake Beever's place, of course. They had set up a tent, a big spread of canvas, and under it Bull Whipple held sway. He was the boss, and his roaring voice soon became familiar to the citizens of Hatchet. "Roll 'em," he would say. "Let them games roll! Everybody's got an even chance. The house only wants its legitimate percentage."

But nobody won, ever, in Bull Whipple's tent. He sold rot-gut whiskey. He short-changed everybody. He had a bad disposition and he wore two guns tied down to his thick legs. But the gandy dancers loved his tent, because of the wooden platform and the Perfessor—and the ladies.

Sure enough, Whipple brought them in, just as Rimrock had prophesied. They were all shapes and sizes with all colors of hair. They wore short skirts and they danced to the Perfessor's tunes with anyone who would buy them a drink.

JAKE BEEVER continued to do his local business—it became a matter of pride not to go into the railroader's tent even though some recalcitrants may have yearned for feminine companionship—but the landslide which he had expected never came. He brooded over this, even losing some weight, as the other merchants of the town grew rich off the newcomers. In the end he went to Jack Rowe and bitterly

complained that the late revels of the Whipple contingent were keeping his wife from her slumber and therefore the place should be closed.

Jack Rowe considered. Then he said honestly, "I'd like to oblige you, Jake. But Rimrock said it wouldn't do any good; they'd send in another crew. And anyway, the folks in town like Miz Whipple, she's so peart and cut-like. No, it won't do. You are jest outa luck, Jake."

Beever raved, "Rimrock ain't in town. He sets out yonder and runs things and I'm missin' all this fine railroad money. It ain't fair and you know it."

"Mebbe it ain't," Jack agreed. "But there she lays. Whyn't you git some kinda show an' give Whipple a run fer his money?"

Jack said, "My woman won't stand for no ladies. . . ."

"I knowed that," said Jack candidly. "I meant a show—like a circus. Acts, what people would like t' see. And music."

Jake said thoughtfully, "Well, whaddaya know? That might be an idee."

The young marshal went about his duties, passing Whipple's house en route to Main Street. The blonde woman was in the yard and he tipped his hat and said, "Howdy, ma'am. You're lookin' mighty chipper this mawnin'."

She looked up, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright. She was not more than twenty, Jack thought, his heart flipping over. She said, "Oh, I feel wonderful. We started the choir last night and I'm to be soloist. I was once in the theater, you know." She straightened her dimity gown self-consciously, preening a little. "I sang. I met Whipple in St. Louis. . . ." A cloud came over her, dimming her beauty.

From the house a voice roared, "Daisy, git in yere this minute, you hear me? These damn eggs are cold!"

She started, wheeled, began running, stumbling a little in her haste. She was in the door and gone before Jack could even escape with dignity. He stood staring. The red, angry face of Whipple appeared at the window, a roller shade was jerked down. The blank, faded green flapped in Jack's face.

He took a deep breath. He was an easy-going young man. He had been raised, an orphan, around Hatchet, and Rimrock Morgan had taken him to the ranch and trained him up to be a cowboy and a good one. The gun-slinging had been a trick, as other men played the fiddle, or harmonica, or plaited bridles and quirts. He just handled guns well, that was all, for fun. He was a simple cowhand with plenty of sand and salt in him and little experience of life.

He did not know what to do when a husband drew a shade to conceal his wife from Jack's innocent view. He knew he had been insulted, but he did not know how to resent it. He walked away, wobbling a little in his high-heeled boots, and his cheeks were flushed. Hitherto he had regarded Bull Whipple as a necessary evil. Coached by Rimrock Morgan, he had let the tent saloon severely alone, and the railroaders had attended to their own troubles. As a matter of fact, the tent was pitched on the extreme edge of Hatchet and could legally be considered out of city limits, Rimrock had carefully pointed out. And in a short while the rails would have gone on, and Hatchet would just be another stop on the road. No use to cause any friction.

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But all day it rankled in Jack Rowe's simple soul that he had thus been affronted by a tinhorn gambler who happened to have a pretty wife. And when he remembered the tone of voice in which Whipple had bellowed at his spouse, he shook with impotent rage. Why, a man wouldn't talk to a mean cayuse like that, much less a defenceless little woman!

It was his helplessness, of course, which made him stick to the subject, ponder it, cudgel his brain for a means of worrying it to a better advantage. Like all young men brought up on a free range, he hated to feel that there was a situation he could not manage. He went home early, deliberately, before sundown, and the tiny figure was in the yard just as it had been that morning.

He said, "It must've been excitin' on the stage. I never seen a real stage play, only circuses and minstrel shows." She turned and she was a little frightened, but she had to smile at his earnestness. He said, desperate to continue the conversation, "Jake Beever's lookin' for acts now, to put on a show."

She said, "Oh, really? Why, Miz Beever is a close friend of mine." Her eyes sparkled, the fear gone. "Now, I wonder. . . ."

Around the corner of the house came the tall, stalwart figure of her husband. He snarled, "Daisy! Git in the house."

Jack Rowe backed a step away from the picket fence. Hs hand dangled carelessly near the single Colt he wore on his hip. He stared eagerly at the big tinhorn, half hoping the man would start something.

Whipple never even glanced at the marshal. He was not wearing a gun—in sight, anyway. He turned his broad back, following his wife. As she got to the front door, her back bowed in humiliation, he gave her a shove over the threshold. Jack, frozen to the spot, heard her cry in a low voice, "Don't strike me, John!"

Then there was silence. The shade was drawn, the door closed. There was nothing in Jack's experience which told him what to do in this instance. He almost burst with the rage in him, but he went to Miz Weevil's and ate his dinner without words. This was a thing, he recognized, far beyond his ken. But he had a good brain and he meant to study a way out.

BEEVER was as excited as on his wedding day. He had a band and they were playing on request everything from hymns to *Camptown Races*. Someone called for *Dixie* and the unreconstructed rebels gave with yells which could be heard past Whipple's tent and all the way to the Triple M, Jack thought. There was a flutist, a harp player and two violinists in the band, also a guitar player. They were all Mexicans and Jack recognized the guitarist.

He said, "Pedro, I thought I sent you to work for Rimrock?"

Anazano smiled beatifically. He was a small man and he wore a bolero jacket and a new green sash for the band. "Senor Reemrock, he send me back. He hear there is a band. He know I play gee-tar."

Jack said, "Well, don't forget that coon can game."

"Too busy," Pedro said, flashing his grin. "Later, when railroaders go."

"Me too," said Jack. "I'm too busy, also."

They were at the bar when she came in, but Jack saw her. He stared hard and spotted the bruise on her cheek at once. There was a slow, burning fire in the blue eyes and she kept the bruised cheek away from the light. Jake was hurrying forward, shocked, trying to shoo her out of the place.

She said firmly, "Miz Beever said you were to give me a chance. I can sing any of those songs the band has been playing. You'll need a lady singer."

Jake said, "But, Miz Whipple, I can't . . . . yore husband. . . ."

Then she said the bravest thing Jack had ever heard. She said clearly, "I have left my husband and am living in Miz Weevil's boarding house for the present, Mr. Beever. I need a job to support myself."

It was a good thing she could sing. If she couldn't, it would have been all the same. Jake would have been forced to hire her. Her resolution to break away from her brute of a husband, in that day and age, was heroism of the first water. She stood on the platform and Pedro, his teeth glistening like pearls, accompanied her, his brown fingers flashing over the strings. She sang *Flow Gently Sweet Afton* and there was not a dry eye in the house.

Then she threw back her head and sang *Sam Bass* in a rollicking voice which turned out to be an alto, rather than the soprano

one would expect from such a small creature, and then they were all really captivated and Jake knew he had the show he needed—if he could hang onto it.

Then the door opened again and in came Bull Whipple. He wore both his guns and his hard face was white and full of hatred. He started down toward the band stand. He did not spare a glance for anyone in the place but his wife. His voice snapped and growled like an animal's. "Daisy! You git down from there an' come home this instant."

No man moved. Daisy trembled for just an instant. Then she drew herself erect and said sharply, "John, if you so much as lay a hand on me I'll—I'll have you bound over to keep the peace!"

Bull Whipple paused, his jaw hanging. There was a stunned silence at this unlooked for answer.

Then Pedro Montanez widened his smile and an impolite giggle emanated from his red lips. Jake Beever put back his head and laughed until tears came. Even Jack Rowe, his hand hovering ever near the walnut butt of his revolver, smiled at the big gambler.

For a moment it seemed that Whipple would do something rash. His hands opened and closed like big talons. His face changed color, ending up a dirty green. His discolored teeth gnashed together. It was almost as if he were about to have a stroke.

Then he drew himself up and turned for the first time to the witnesses. His eye fell upon Jack Rowe. It went up and down, surveying the marshal from head to foot. He had never deigned to look at Jack before. Now his yellowish orbs gleamed, examining every inch of the tall, slim young lawman.

Quite deliberately he turned. He strode out of the barroom. They heard his heels upon the boards. Then he was gone.

Daisy Whipple said half to herself, "That is when he is really dangerous—when he does not roar or threaten." She avoided Jack's gaze, but her warning was for him, he guessed. It made him feel warm. He was not afraid, because it had never entered his head that there was such a thing as fear. He had much to learn about life.

Rimrock came in that night to hear Daisy sing. He sat in the bar, his finger going back and forth across his white mustache. His eyes were not moist, nor his expression dewy, for Rimrock had very little ear for music. However, he was impressed, and he told Jake Beever that the band and the singer would bring some of the trade some of the time. He added, "And trouble, too. You'll have trouble."

Jake said anxiously, "We got a marshal, ain't we? He'll handle it, won't he?"

Rimrock said, "I'm raisin' him up to handle things." He rode alone back to Triple M.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun Mission for a Lawman

THE next night the trouble started. Working for Bull Whipple was a lanky man named Post, and this lean man had a way with him. He could get a crowd laughing with his cracks and his insinuations and make quite a fool of any target he chose. He could do this in such a way as to shame a body, and still Post seemed not to be malicious enough to rate being beaten, or stabbed, or shot. He was a city fellow and wore a round hat and store clothes, like the railroad workers and he did not sport a gun—not openly he didn't.

This Post came into Beever's just before the band started to play with Miz Whipple singing the opening number, *La Paloma.* He drank a couple of whiskies and cracked a few jokes and as he spent his own money even Beever laughed at his drollery. When Daisy came out in her white dress, her shoulders bare, he stared and gave a long low whistle. He said, "Jake, where'd you get the doll?" Then he affected to stare and said, "Why, it's Mrs. Bull Whipple! Say, you think old Bull's gonna like this, fellas? Ain't it like stealin' a man's hoss to enter agin him in a race?"

He said it with a leer and a laugh and a couple of men guffawed. Jake did not laugh. Post's voice was so loud it carried to the platform, and Daisy Whipple faltered on her opening notes. Pedro came in hard on the guitar and the band covered up, but three tough Irishers from the railroad gang were coming in the door, and all were noisy.

Jack Rowe was there. He had been at the end of the bar, almost as nervous as a bridegroom, waiting for Daisy to sing.

Now he walked out, and at last he felt he could do something. He said sternly to the Irishers, "The show is on. You'll have to keep quiet."

The Irishers stared at Daisy and in unison they whistled. "Sure, it's the Bull's woman!" they said, one after the other. It created more confusion.

Jack stepped around, getting the bar at his back. Post was laughing and saying, "Sure, boys it is that!"

The Irishers had arms down to their knees. They could, and did, fight for amusement. They broke each other's jaws, they bit and gouged and then got up all bloody and drank together in amity. Woe betide anyone who tackled the three of them together. Jack slid farther away from them. He came alongside Post and in a low voice he said, "Take 'em out of here."

Post had bold, round eyes. He laughed again. "We mean no harm. How could I take them out, anyhow?"

Jacks' gun came out; he pressed the round rim of its muzzle hard into Post's ribs. He said steadily, "I wouldn't know. I'm just telling you to do it."

Post said, "You dassn't shoot me. You're only making a fool of yourself and Bull's damn woman." He still smiled, but his lips were thin and now he did not look like a funny fellow.

Jack shoved the revolver harder, until he could feel the give of the ribs. His voice was low and harsh. "I'll take you down to the jail alone. I'll beat your damn head off. Now—take 'em out!"

They glared at one another, and Post was only Whipple's jackal, not a man on his own. Even if he had the nerve, it wasn't his game, and he would not risk his hide for a small move in Whipple's game. He turned and walked out of the bar and after a moment of indecision the Irishmen, who were not too bright and were also only carrying out orders, followed.

But Jack was sweating, because this was not any good. He could not keep doing this all the time. Pedro triumphantly vamped *La Paloma* all over again and Daisy sang it for a large and enthusiastic audience, but Beever's Bar was not all of Hatchet, and Jack could not stand constant guard over the woman and the peace of the establishment, he knew. There were thousands of the Irishers and now that he stopped to think about it, they could clean up Hatchet any time they got together. They were the toughest men in the world.

Only the big tent of Bull Whipple had kept them under control. In that temple of sin they could find everything they wished —wine, women, and song in quantity if not in quality. They could gamble—and when they lost they had to go back to work on Monday and never pester the merchants of Hatchet. By keeping them poor, Whipple kept them tractable.

It bore in upon Jack, as he patrolled the town, walking gingerly past dark corners now, that Rimrock had known this in advance. Rimrock had cautioned them. It was Jack's job to keep down all sign of surface trouble, but Whipple really kept the Irishers in line.

Somehow it did not seem fair. The gandy dancers and steel layers were too tough for Jack to feel exactly sorry for them. But Whipple must have been getting very rich at their expense. And all they had for their trouble was a Monday morning hangover and empty pockets. If this was the system of keeping Hatchet safe from the railroaders, it was a pretty snide business, Jack thought.

He had just passed the smithy on the corner of Jackson and Main. There was the tiniest of betraying movements in the dark, then three figures steamed into the open. They were coming straight at him without concealment, without noise, and it was the same three Irishers who had been in Beever's bar.

He had been warned in time to wheel away as the first one dove at him. He got his back to the smithy wall and kicked with the high heel of his boot. The attacker's head was low, coming at his knees as another came high and the third lurked to get in his licks. Jack kicked the first one on the jaw and flattened him.

There was a little light from the lamp in the window across the street, in the adobe house where Pedro Anazano lived. The second Irisher, coming in high, expected his partner to have Jack's feet cut out from under him. Therefore, he was somewhat amazed when Jack drew his Colt with the celerity of a magician producing a rabbit from a hat. He tried to stop and escape.

The third railroader, coming in fast, sensing something was wrong, ran smack

into the one who had already begun a strategic retreat. Their heads banged together. Jack, back against the wall, thumbed back the hammer of the big frontier gun. There was a dull, hollow sound.

The two Irishers reeled, stunned, staggering. Their heads had collided. Jack stepped in, very businesslike, and rapped the muzzle of the Colt against the head of first one, then the other. The jail was quite close. It was a little trouble, but he was very strong, and he got all three of them into the three cells the Hatchet jail could boast.

IT WAS characteristic of Jack that he thought nothing of this encounter. He knew that it was war from the moment the blonde woman defied Whipple and went to work for Beever. In fact he dimly supposed it had been inevitable that conflict should ensue since the day he had smiled at the wife of Bull Whipple in the front yard of the cottage. Of course he would be attacked—often and with vigor.

He went on about his patrol, very thoughtful. He could see trouble for Hatchet in a vendetta of this sort. He wondered if he should resign as marshal and fight it out man to man with Bull. Of course everyone would say it was over Daisy Whipple. He blushed hotly at the thought.

Then he knew he could not resign his position. Rimrock Morgan, who had raised him, had put him on the job. He was in the office for a purpose. He had to do his best to keep Hatchet from being run over by the railroaders and any private squabble into which he was forced could not alter the fact that he had a bounded duty to perform. He finished his patrol at the edge of town, staring at the light which came through the canvas walls of Whipple's huge tent.

There was noise aplenty, as Beever had complained. The shrill voices of the lady entertainers caterwauled through the night. They were not refined ladies, Jack thought severely, and their costumes were far from modest. They in no way resembled the demure girl in white who sang *Annie Laurie* at Beever's Bar.

The battle was joined and the lines clearly drawn, he went on in his thoughts. There were the hordes of the invaders—and there was Jack Rowe. Rimrock had put him out on the end of the limb and left him to his own salvation—if any.

Mr. Hortell was also the magistrate, and

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he fined the Irishers heavily, warning them. Bull Whipple was in court and ostentatiously paid the fines. Then the town knew, even the lowliest Mexican, that trouble was due. The three freed railroaders gathered in the big tent and took to whiskey. Post was with them, nudging them, laughing at them, doing his part in stirring the pot of ill feeling. Bull Whipple towered, providing free whiskey for the trio, and for such of their friends as had refrained from working that day to witness the trial. By nightfall there were a hundred raging, red-necked, hard-headed gandy dancers, steel layers and bridge men come in from the creek crossing, all talking fight in the big tent.

It was the hour of trial for Jack Rowe. He arrested two Negroes for fighting over a dice game. He slapped a drunken Mexican and sent him home. He went into Beever's place and listened to the woman sing.

Her voice was hearty and throaty and jolly tonight. Freedom from the brutishness of Bull Whipple had done something for her, all right. She smiled at the citizens of Hatchet and sang to them and she was more beautiful, in Jack's eyes, than ever.

He went out, his emotions mixed. He walked quietly to where he could keep an eye on Main Street and on the big tent also. The noise from the railroaders' haven was the worst it had ever been. In a moment it would indeed constitute a public nuisance and if invited to act—Jack would have to enter the environs of Bull Whipple.

He doubted seriously if he would ever survive to walk out. In the thick heads of the railroad men were no brains nor reason nor fear. They would kill him first and think later of the results.

He touched the star he had not sought. Rimrock had done this to him, and he reckoned that Rimrock had a reason. The old man almost always got him into a jackpot for some good reason. Jack could not figure out this one—it looked like it led to the grave. But he was in it, and he would have to act according to his lights, for that was the way Rimrock had taught him. He turned and walked slowly back down Main Street toward Beever's place.

He came to the smithy where he had been ambushed the previous night and it was invitingly dark within. The front was open, and the anvil provided a place over which to swing his leg while he rolled a smoke and pondered.

Thus, he was concealed when the first of them came down the street. They were making no noise, which was the worst sign of all, as Daisy had remarked about her husband. There were three of them, not the same three, and they drifted into the bar. The woman was singing, but there was no noise or interruption of the cadence of Pedro's guitar. The harpist pinged his little arpeggios and the alto voice was fresh and clear.

Over against the west the tent bulged with the sound of a trumpet blowing swift cadenzas. Two more soberly dressed men came from the back and made their way toward Beever's bar. In another moment a half dozen came out and these split up into pairs and strolled, without haste, but converged in due time on the same objective. Jack cupped his cigarette in his palm and watched, his face growing grim and his heart getting heavy within him.

There were too many of them. By the time Whipple himself got down to the saloon where his wife sought to escape from his brutality, the place would be jammed with his cohorts. And this time they would not be disorderly, would not give the marshal an excuse to throw them out. They would merely provide the background, serve as a threat while their leader took away his lawful wife. Jack could imagine the righteousness which was in their Celtic souls as, sober and in their store clothes, they went forth upon this crusade against the uncouth heretics of the Western town.

For once, Jack thought sadly, Rimrock Morgan had bit off more of a chaw than he could handle. The old man had always played along with his system of putting Jack into a taradiddle and then expecting the youth to climb out and thus gain knowledge in the seamy ways of the world. But this was one time when Jack could not climb out.

Of course, neither could he back down. He watched the railroaders pour into Beever's place. He saw, at last, the big man himself, Bull Whipple, emerge from the tent. He was accompanied only by the lean and sinister Post.

Whipple had chosen to don a light gray,

round-brimmed, low-crowned hat, an Eastern hat, a hat to defy cowtown convention. His shining boots were city wear, congress gaiters, narrow of toe. He wore a frilled shirt, immaculately white and a large, somewhat yellow diamond pin. Post was also attired like the lilies of the field. These were men who savored their victory.

He watched them go into the saloon. Daisy Whipple was singing *Buffalo Gals* and he braced himself for a faltering in the lively tune. He could distinctly hear the plunking of Pedro's guitar. The brown hands which were so skillful at dealing cards or carving an enemy never hesitated.

Then, to his astonishment and relief, the voice of the girl went on, ringing out without a tremor. In fact, as she went into the chorus, "Buffalo gals, can't you come out tonight. . . . And dance by the light of the moon. . . . ?" it seemed to him that there was a new, brave note of defiance in the overtones. It brought him up standing and then he was first aware of the pride he took in her.

CHAPTER THREE

Job for a Knife Man

THEN, also, Jack was aware of fear. It was not fear for himself. It was not based on doubt, for now he knew, in a flash, what he must do. It was wholly a fear for her and what would happen to the woman in the white dress who sang so bravely, if he failed. It was a new emotion, and it struck deep and sharp to his vitals. He threw away the cigarette and walked out of the smithy and now he was no longer the coltish young man, Jack Rowe, Rimrock's adopted boy, strawboss of the Triple M. He was someone else, who looked like that boy and acted like him, too, but who was very different deep down inside.

He stalked down Main Street, past the corner of Jackson. He paused at the swinging doors which gave egress to the saloon. The applause at the end of *Buffalo Gals* was deafening. He did not hear Whipple's bullying voice and decided that the big man was playing cat to Mrs. Whipple's role of mouse. He started through the doors, then this new, deep feeling caught him and he changed his mind and his tactics, and then he ceased even acting like the old Jack Rowe.

He went down the alley alongside the building which housed the bar.

He came to the rear window and threw up the sash. His long legs slid over the sill and he was in the storage room, among whiskey barrels and cases of beer and wine. He threaded his way toward the sliver of light which showed the door to the main bar. They had built the stage across in line with this door.

It was, therefore, safe to open it and glide across the intervening boards, safely out of sight of the crowd which stood along the mahogany or against the walls, surrounding the poker tables. There was a small knot of local merchants and lesser citizens, he could see, at the near end of the bar. Beever, his face white, had his hands out of sight, but there were four Irishers watching him and he would have little chance to bring up the shotgun.

They were fully surrounded by the Irishers who bided their time, every eye upon the platform. The girl in white stood facing them. Pedro fingered the guitar and the girl said firmly, "As an encore, I will sing for you the lovely Scotch number *Loch Lomond.*"

Post, lounging beside Whipple, called in his humorous, soft voice, "Oh, sing us a livelier tune than that. Sing the Widder song. Ha, ha!"

The Irishers, as if at a signal, laughed in their thick throats. Whipple was holding himself a bit apart, stony, playing the big man. Yet Jack had seen this giant, this two-gun man shove a small woman, his wife, across a doorsill.

Post was saying, "She don't want to sing that. She's not a widdow!"

Again the ugly laughter. Whipple drank whisky and glowered. None of the local citizens dared say anything. Beever cleared his throat, miserably afraid that the Irishers would break his place up into bits. He almost whimpered, "Leave the lady alone, gents."

Pedro strummed the guitar and did not seem to be aware of what went on. Jack came close to the stand, still keeping out of sight. It was Post who retained the lead part. He said, "Why don't you go home, Miz Whipple? The men can hear good singin' over to our place."

She turned, for to answer him meant defeat. She looked past Pedro, seeking succor from the wall, like a wayward school child reprimanded by her teacher, Jack thought with a great pity. And Whipple, sensing victory, chose that moment to say in his thundering voice, "Daisy! Git down and go home an' take off that there dress and git me some supper."

She saw Jack and her face froze. She was not asking help from him, he saw. In fact, she was asking that he leave.

Jack was grateful for it, but he went by her. He stepped onto the platform into full view and a sigh went up from the throats of the Irishers as their enemy was at last in sight—and in reach. They surged a little closer.

One called, "There he is—the home wrecker!"

But Jack put up his hand. He said sharply, "Just a minute, men. This fellow, this Whipple comes here and orders Mr. Beever's entertainer to git. This fellow has entertainers of his own. He's a rival businessman to Mr. Beever. When he comes in here and tries to stop Mr. Beever's show, he is in—in restraint of trade. That there is a crime!" He might be wrong about that, he knew, but he was wearing a star and he had to have a legal point to hang upon.

Post said, "For shame. It's the man's own wife. Legal wife!"

Jack said, "That don't signify. The woman hired out. She sings here and here she stays. And if Mr. Whipple wants to take her out, he can step forward right now with both his damn guns and we will see if he is man enough!"

He put himself between the woman on the platform and the two men, Whipple and Post, who were close together. The Irishers did not move. He had put it on a man-to-man basis, and he had shoved it down their throats and they had their own code of honor. They might beat him up afterwards, but this they would respect. It was up to Whipple, now. He could come out with his guns and open the ball—or he could crawl.

THEN the two men, the jackal and the giant, made their play. There were men at the bar who saw it, and even the Irishers gasped at its unfolding. It was Post who moved, first cautiously, then with greater daring than it was believed he possessed. In between Whipple and Jack he paused, screening for the moment the figure of his boss. He stayed there, drawing a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his city jacket.

Behind Post, the big man's hands slapped leather. He ejaculated, "Okay, Post!" and his guns swept up, levelled, and began barking.

Post jumped at the word of command, going to the right.

But when Post jumped, Jack, whose eyes had been following the maneuver, also jumped. Behind him the music stopped, but he knew he had to follow Post out to complete the pattern or his life was lost. And then he saw that under the kerchief, Post had hidden a derringer, and that if need be, Post would use it.

The music had stopped. Jack's hand, which had practised, for fun and for parties and celebrations, imitating the great names of the West's gun-slinging heroes, pounced, drawing the Colt. He danced another step and shot Post.

The derringer exploded, but the vicious slug tore into Beever's ceiling. The Irishers were transfixed, so swift was the action. Their original intent, to smash the place, had been stalled by Jack's challenge to Whipple; now they were frozen by the course of events.

Jack was still sidling, his right side pointed toward his assailants, making as little target as possible. His good-looking young features were still and careful and hard. He shot Post again, low down, as Rimrock had always told him he must shoot to stop a man cold.

It took Post quite a long time to fall. He kept tipping over, like in a dream, walking with his legs rubbery, and then he fell down at last, under Whipple's feet. And then Jack could see Whipple, and he almost did not believe what he saw.

He saw Whipple, pinned against the bar, his right sleeve deftly caught and stabbed. The loose sleeve of the city jacket had made a good target. The haft of the knife quivered, and Whipple was shooting his left hand gun, but he was no good with it and the bullets all went into the floor as he struggled to get his right hand loose. No gunman is good with both hands, Rimrock

had always said. The left-hand gun is for show, he had sneered. A real good man packs one weapon and always levels it before he fires, never wasting a bullet.

Pedro balanced another knife. He said softly, "Shall I keel him, Senor Jack? Or do you weesh to do eet yourself?"

Jack leaped like a catamount across the floor of the bar. His revolver made an arc, shining in the light of the chandelier. The muzzle cracked against the ear of the big man. He pitched forward, the left-hand Colt bouncing on the floor. His right arm remained caught by the sleeve, with Pedro's knife pinioning it to the front of Beever's bar.

The Irishers came to life as Jack crouched, facing them, his gun ready.

Behind the bar Beever arose, the shotgun firmly clenched. It was sawed-off and ugly in Beever's eye was the property man's determination not to have his possessions vandalized. Jack spat at them, "Hold it, you tarriers! We'll kill some of you if yuh don't hold it an' listen! By God, this man Whipple sent you here and then got what was comin' to him. I'd advise you all to stop and think."

It was then the door opened. Rimrock came in, not violently, just as usual, strolling, a bowlegged old man. He fingered his white mustache and drawled, "Uh-huh. I reckoned it'd be like o' this. C'mon in, boys."

Jack realized at that moment that his hands were sweating and that he might have missed his first shots. He stood erect, wiping his face on his sleeve, watching his own boys come in. They did not even draw their guns. There was Whitey and Oat Eye and Jimmy and Ponce and Frisco and Laramie Andy and—oh, there were all the Triple M riders and some more they'd picked up at surrounding spreads. They all grinned and Laramie called, "Can't handle it without us, huh, Jack?"

He exploded, "Lawdy, no!"

They laughed. The Irishers did not laugh. They were brave and there were more of them in the tent up the street, but they did not charge. It would be suicide and they knew it. And besides, their leaders were down. They looked at the cowboys, they looked at Rimrock.

Rimrock said gently, "G'wan back to the tent. Whipple's under arrest. Ye won't see him again. We're runnin' him out. The drinks are on me."

A big red-neck said, "Whuskey?"

"A barrel of it, so ye stay where ye belong," said Rimrock.

The big man said, "So be it!" He led them back down the street. Post was good and dead. Rimrock stirred Whipple with his toe. He said, "Pedro, ye did right. I was watchin' over the swingin' doors. Ye got onto the trick the way I showed ye and ye were jest the man fer it." He handed Pedro some money.

Rimrock's mild blue eyes went to Jack, then to the woman in white. Daisy still stood on the platform, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. The old rancher said, "Well, ye didn't kill him when he was he'pless, an' thet is a thing ye kin live with —later. Ye better see t' Miz Whipple. She seems right sick. Ye wouldn't want her around when he wakes up."

Jack said, "I gotta put him in jail."

"Yuh won't even haffta," said Rimrock. "He'll wanta pack a few things. The boys and me'll take him over an' put him on that freight goin' out at midnight. He won't be no trouble."

Jack went out through the back, the way he had come. That way they avoided the eyes of the curious. She said firmly, "I'll divorce him. It's an awful disgrace, but I can work and make my way."

"Yes'm," said Jack.

She said, "I'm—I'm glad you didn't kill him."

"Yes'm," said Jack. "Yuh might's well know. Rimrock planned it thataway. He knows me good and he put Pedro to followin' us—me."

She said, "He's a great man. I have no fear so long as he is my friend. In a year I'll have my divorce."

Jack said, "Y'already talked to Rimrock about it?"

"Oh yes," she said. "He suggested it. I was gratified."

"H'mm," said Jack. Well, that was settled. Rimrock always had his way. It was good to know a man like Rimrock was your friend, all right. He had learned a lot, thanks to Rimrock. He looked hungrily at the blonde girl, but a year was not too long, he thought.

THE END

. . . LAY YOUR

Dynamic Novel with the Smash of a .45!

By

WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Branded with the crimson stigma of his dad's outlaw past, Holt Cardigan swore that he would make the whole town of Silver Creek eat dirt. . . . Which signalled the beginning of a dead man's jamboree, and a twenty-four hour work-day for lawmen, gun-slingers — and undertakers!

"I can still lick the hell out of you, Wilder!" Holt said.

LINES TO HELL!

"A promise given is a promise to be kept," she said.

CHAPTER ONE

Singing Wires to Silver Creek

HOLT CARDIGAN looked at his watch for the tenth time in the last half hour. It was eighty-thirty. The meeting had been called for eight, and of the more than one hundred men who should have been there, exactly one had come. Cardigan sat down behind the table in front of the room, the lamp making a ruddy glow across his high-boned face and showing the tension that this half-hour had brought to him. Actually it was not just the frustration of the half-hour; it was all this year he had lived in Silver Creek, of being in the town but not a part of it. A man can absorb but so much, and Holt Cardigan was close to the saturation point.

Out in the second row Concho Thorn rolled a cigarette and grinned at Cardigan. "You're getting a bad deal on this, Holt. Better cash in and quit the game."

"I don't like the idea of quitting a game until I'm done." Cardigan got up and pacing to the window, stood staring at the lights of this hostile town.

"You're done now, mister," Thorn said a little brutally. "You just don't know it yet."

Maybe he was. Maybe he was just so mule-headed he couldn't tell when he was licked. He'd grown up in Silver Creek, he'd gone away to law school, and now he'd returned and set up an office over Ezra Fleming's bank. Somehow he'd paid his office rent all year, but he'd gone hungry more days than not. He'd had a few legal papers to draw up, most of them for Thorn. Once he'd gone to Blue Rock, the county seat, to represent Pop Yaffee, the stage owner. He'd won his case, but he'd never been given another.

He'd been a fool to come back to the town where he'd been raised. Fleming had told him that, yet it was a move he had to make. He couldn't tell exactly why, but he had to come, to make the name Cardigan stand for something where it had been a synonym for robbery.

Thorn stood up and moved to the window. "I don't quite savvy you, Holt. You won't make anything out of this telephone company if it does go through."

"Does a man have to make something, Concho? Isn't it possible that I could do something for nothing?"

"Possible, but damned improbable." Thorn tossed his cigarette out of the window. "Funny thing, Holt, a fellow like you who's had to fight his way up, talking about doing something for nothing."

"I would get one thing," Cardigan said moodily, "an intangible something I couldn't buy."

"Just what would that be?" An amused smile came to Thorn's lips. "It takes tangibles to pay the rent."

"Good will."

The amused smile remained on Thorn's lips. "I've made my living buying cattle for the last fifteen years, Holt. I haven't been here in Silver Creek very long, but it'll pan out the same as the other towns where I've lived. I've learned one thing. A man doesn't get good will or anything else but kicks for doing things for nothing."

"Maybe you're right, Concho," Cardigan murmured.

"You know you can't get folks to back the telephone company until you swing Ezra Fleming over to your side, don't you?"

"I thought maybe he'd come to the meeting tonight."

Thorn snorted. "You're having dreams, friend. Don't you know what folks are saying?"

Cardigan pinned his eyes on Thorn's dark face. The cattle buyer claimed to be his friend. He said he was in favor of the telephone line. And he was engaged to Jean Fleming. Not that it would have made any difference with Thorn's feelings toward Cardigan. No one else in Silver Creek, unless it was Jean, knew how Holt Cardigan felt about her.

It was natural enough that Jean would fall in love with Concho Thorn. He was a handsome man—handsome and rich and endowed with that intangible quality that made folks trust him. He'd been in town a month when Cardigan returned from law school. He'd deposited ten thousand dollars in Fleming's bank, he'd bought a house that was second only to Fleming's, and he'd started courting Jean.

Cardigan said, "No, I haven't heard."

"The talk is that you're trying to raise this five thousand dollars for the telephone line and then skip out with it."

CARDIGAN hadn't heard it, but he wasn't surprised. They were righteous folks here in Silver Creek, righteous and critical and cruel. His father had never been a vicious man or killed anyone, but he had been a thief. There were those who considered that a capital crime. Cardigan didn't remember his mother, but from what old Pop Yaffee in the stage office told him, the town had never accepted her.

Bitterness had its way with Holt Cardigan then. His gray eyes narrowed; his jaw muscles corded. It wasn't enough for him to starve. It wasn't enough for him to try to do something unselfish for a community he wanted to call home. Holt Cardigan stared at the row of lights along the street, a sense of failure washing an acid through him. He muttered, "I guess they've judged me and found me guilty."

"I tell you you're done in this burg, Holt," Thorn said more sharply than was his habit. "It gravels me like hell to see you get treated this way, but it's just the way the damned town is. I wish you'd have sense enough to pack up your law books and try it somewhere else."

Cardigan lowered the window and walked back to the table. "Let's travel. Two of us can't organize a telephone company, and nobody else is coming. That's sure."

Cardigan blew out the lamp, and as they left the lodge hall, Thorn said, "Let's have a drink before you go up to your room, Holt."

Shrugging, Cardigan grunted his acceptance and fell into step with Thorn. He hadn't had a drink for a long time. In fact, about the only times he ever had a drink was when he stepped into the stage office and Pop Yaffee dug a bottle out of the litter behind the counter.

"It's a hell of a life," Thorn was saying as they turned into the Prairie Bar. "You're just too good-natured, Holt. Or maybe you've got hold of some ideals. Bad things. They'll wreck you sure. Look out for number one, and let other people look out for themselves."

"Want your money back?"

"Not unless you're licked," Thorn said quickly. "I want a telephone line."

"Then I'll keep it for a spell." Cardigan nodded at the barkeep. "Whiskey."

"Whiskey," Thorn said.

There were only two other men on the belly side of the bar, and Cardigan, glancing at them, saw that they were strangers who had not been in town more than a week, Bucky King and Zane Wilder. Tough hands, Cardigan had judged, who, likely, had tarried in Silver Creek because the climate would suit a man with a smoky past.

Cardigan downed his drink. Thorn said, "Have another?"

"No thanks."

King's words came clearly to Cardigan, "Sure funny about the tinhorns you run into in these little burgs. That Cardigan hombre must be a smooth one."

"His telephone scheme was all right, Bucky, if he could have swung it." Zane Wilder reached for the whiskey bottle. "Five thousand is enough to play for."

Cardigan started around Thorn, but the cattle buyer grabbed his arm. "No use making a ruckus, Holt. They're just a couple of hardcases who'll be gone in a week or two."

But Cardigan sensed it was more than that. Their voices were louder than necessary, and they had started this talk only when Cardigan had come in. He waited, eyes on the pair, and King said, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind holding the home folks up for five thousand if I was back home."

"They'd hang you if you were back there, wouldn't they, Bucky?" Zane Wilder laughed. "Maybe they oughta hang Holt Cardigan. I reckon you can't expect anything else of a hombre who had a horse thief for a father and a mother who was a . . . "

Concho Thorn didn't hold Cardigan now, and he didn't try, for Cardigan raged past him like a wild man, grabbed Wilder by a meaty shoulder, and whirling him, drove a fist upward to the point of his jaw in a short, wicked blow that had all his one hundred seventy pounds behind it. Wilder went down, loose-jointed and inert, his beefy body spilling full out into the sawdust.

For a moment there was no sound but that of men's breathing sawing into the quiet. Then Bucky King said as if the words were dragged out of him, "You sure pack a punch, mister. I don't reckon Zane Wilder was ever knocked out in his life before." Then, as if remembering suddenly this was not the role he had been given to play, he grabbed for his gun, a stream of blustering oaths pouring from him.

Cardigan was on him, sledging him on one side of the head and then the other until King backed away, trying to keep his left fist in front of his face while he drew his gun with his right. Then Cardigan had him pinned against the bar, a whistling right smashing out a mouthful of teeth, and King's gun, half-drawn, fell to the floor. King spat blood, swung a futile fist at Cardigan, and jerking free, fell sideways.

"Get up" Cardigan snapped. "You're not licked."

King spit out another mouthful of blood and teeth. "I'm licked, mister, but I'll be around another time when it won't go like this."

Cardigan picked up King's gun and slid it along the mahogany to the barman. "Keep that for a spell, Luke."

"You've got a nice punch, Holt," Concho Thorn murmured.

"I had to learn to fight when I grew up in this burg," Cardigan said. "Thanks for the drink, Concho."

"Where you headed?"

"Down to see Mr. Ezra Fleming," Cardigan said sourly. "I was just wondering why he didn't show up at the meeting."

"Maybe you won't want to hear what he's got to say," Thorn warned.

"I'll listen and so will he," Cardigan said grimly, and swung out of the saloon.

CHAPTER TWO

"Don't Trust Cardigan!"

THE Fleming house had been built by Ezra Fleming during Cardigan's absence in law school. He had never been in it, and now as he came along the row of young poplars and turned through the gate in the picket fence, he thought that Fleming had planned it carefully with one express purpose in mind: to keep constantly before the inhabitants of Silver Creek a reminder of his position. It would, Cardigan told himself grimly, do exactly that.

It was a great, two-story house topping the knoll north of town. A spacious, well-kept yard dropped gently toward the picket fence in front. Cardigan followed the flagstone walk to the porch, rang the heavy bell, and heard its metallic echoes repeat themselves far back in the interior of the great house.

Holt Cardigan had a bad moment then. Ezra Fleming would not like his coming here, but it was as Concho Thorn had said. There was no chance to secure popular support for the telephone line unless Fleming was behind it, and Fleming had refused even to listen.

Cardigan's lips tightened. Ezra Fleming would listen now, he told himself, if he had to hold the banker in his chair while he talked. Then he heard steps inside the house, the door opened and Jean Fleming stood there.

Breath went out of Holt Cardigan in that instant. He had expected the housekeeper and not Jean to answer the door. She peered into the gloom a moment, the hall lamp behind her throwing her shapely body into a clear silhouette. Then, recognizing Cardigan, she said cordially, "Why, it's Holt. How nice. Come in."

"Hope it isn't too late," he said apologetically, and stepping into the hall, followed Jean on into the living room. It held all the luxury he had expected—mahogany and walnut furniture, a white oak floor, brocaded drapes, a massive fireplace made of petrified wood. Yet, for all of Ezra Fleming's wealth, of which this great room bore witness, Cardigan felt a mockery in it, a hollowness, an utter lack of human warmth.

Jean, standing beside the divan, saw his quick look of appraisal, and laughed shortly. "It's fine, isn't it, Holt? Like a museum. All we need are some moose heads and a couple of stuffed bears."

She was usually a pleasant girl, this Jean Fleming, whose red lips and blue eyes gave way easily to friendly smiles. There was none of her father's austerity in her, none of his false sense of importance. Thinking back now, Cardigan remembered the talks he and Jean had had during their last year in high school when Ezra Fleming was not as rich and powerful as he was now. The ties of friendship had been close then; the talks had been of intimate and important things, talks such as only teen-agers have. For the moment he was stirred by that memory, and he was forced to admit, something he had not permitted himself to do before, that his real reason for stubbornly staying in Silver Creek was to show Jean Fleming that the name Cardigan could stand for something other than the connotation Silver Creek gave it.

"It's quite a show place," Cardigan said, bringing his thoughts back to the present.

"I'd trade it all," she said scornfully, "for the little house we used to live in." Then she laughed, and gestured as if to thrust all this aside. "How are you, Holt? I don't see much of you any more."

He glanced down at her left hand, saw the brilliance of the diamond's sparkle. "No, I guess we don't have much reason for being together any more. Jean, I want to see your father. Do you suppose you can fix it for me?"

He thought he saw disappointment shade her eyes, and then told himself it was his imagination.

"Of course. I'll fix it. He's back in his den."

Cardigan followed her along the hall to the back of the house. She tapped on a closed door, and when Fleming called, "What is it?" she opened the door, and stepped in.

"A gentleman to see you, Dad," Jean

said, and motioned for Cardigan to follow her.

Ezra Fleming was a small man, possessed of a small man's inordinate pride. He had risen to his present position from as low a point as Holt Cardigan stood now, and with understandable unreasonableness, was positive no one else could do the same. He stared coldly at Cardigan, hazel eyes as unfriendly as two pieces of flint on a frosty morning. The nearby lamp cast its yellow gleam across his smooth-shaven face, and Cardigan, noting the banker's tight-drawn skin as he had not before, was surprised at the almost lifeless quality of it. At fifty Ezra Fleming had achieved old age.

"Good evening, Mr. Fleming," Cardigan said coolly. "I expected you at the meeting tonight."

Fleming nodded at Jean, and the girl said, "I'll see you before you leave, Holt." She closed the door, and there was silence in the little room until the girl's steps died along the hall.

"I will not, even by the gesture of my attendance at a meeting," Fleming said, "have anything to do with a proposed telephone project which you have your hands in, Cardigan." Fleming's cold, clipped words held as little friendliness as his eyes. He did not invite Cardigan to sit down.

"Wires have now been stretched from Reno across the state line into Blue Rock," Cardigan said. "It would be no great task to bring them on into Silver Creek. Are you contending that a telephone line would not be an asset to this community?"

Fleming snorted. "Of course we need a telephone into Silver Creek with a mail stage going out only once a week, but damn it, Cardigan, I don't trust you or anything you have a hand in. When I give my support to such a project, it will be one sponsored by the respectable citizens of this community. Or I'll sponsor it myself after you're finished."

Cardigan caught his breath. He might have expected this. He said sharply, "Are you implying I'm not respectable?"

Fleming spread his skinny, blue-veined hands. "Cardigan, I knew your parents. I watched you grow up in this community, grabbing at whatever straws you could. How you got a lawyer's training, I don't know, but you got one and you've starved to death here. The temptation to a hungry man in handling ten thousand dollars is too much."

Cardigan held his temper. He said, "You've consistently refused to listen to the proposition, and you wouldn't come to the meeting to listen. Now you're going to."

"I think not, Cardigan. I have work to do."

THERE was only the heavy mahogany desk between the banker and Holt Cardigan. When Fleming dipped his hand into the drawer for a gun, Cardigan acted instinctively. He shoved the desk toward the wall, tilting Fleming's chair so that the banker was caught behind it, the edge of the desk pressing hard against his stomach. He let out a strangled yell, trying to get breath that wouldn't come, and somehow managing to lift the short-barreled gun above the desk. Then Cardigan was on him, ripping the Colt from his almost lax fingers and easing the desk away from him.

"You're a little crazy, aren't you, Mr. Fleming?" Cardigan asked softly. "Or is it that your exalted position in this community lifts you above talking to me, and permits you to kill a man?"

Fleming's pinched face was entirely white. He was breathing rapidly, eyes narrowed, lips flat against his teeth, and Cardigan, seeing him this way, laughed aloud. "You're a little man, Fleming, in both body and soul, and it's a comical sight watching you try to make yourself big."

Fleming said thickly, "Go on. Get out, or I'll have you arrested for assault."

Cardigan laughed again as he looked down at the gun he had taken from Fleming. "And I'll have you arrested for attempted murder. No, I don't think you'll try that. Now you're going to listen. It's about one hundred miles from here to Blue Rock. You know Dan Moore, the engineer, don't you?"

When Fleming nodded, Cardigan went on, "Dan built the line into Blue Rock, so he knows what he's talking about. He says the line from here south could be built for fifty dollars a mile, which means we've got to raise five thousand. It might run a little more. Dan says not ever seven thousand. Fleming, there are about one hundred and twenty families between here and Blue Rock who could have telephones. If even

half of them subscribed one hundred dollars apiece we could do the job."

The fire had gone out of Ezra Fleming. He sat entirely still, breathing hard. He said in a strained voice, "I have never given my approval to any kind of an enterprise in this community that has not turned out well. I won't take the risk now."

Cardigan, because he had been grasping at straws most of his life, grasped at one now. "You trust Concho Thorn. He was the only one at the meeting tonight, and he's subscribed one hundred dollars."

"Concho?" Fleming shook his head as if he did not believe it. "He's scared of this deal as much as anybody. If he did put the money up, it was nothing more than a good will gesture. I know he does not support your project."

Again the gnawing sense of defeat was in Holt Cardigan. He said sharpily, "If I weren't in it, you'd be for it. That it, Fleming?"

"I had intended to spare you this, Cardigan," the banker said wearily. "I have not publicized the matter, but from what has happened tonight, I may have to."

Fleming drew a sheet of paper from his top drawer, and laid it on the desk. Cardigan, scanning it, felt anger rush through him in a hot, red wave.

> Dear Mr. Fleming:
> In regard to your inquiry concerning the promotion scheme Holt Cardigan is pushing, I would like to say we know nothing of it. We will be glad to cooperate with you in organizing your Silver Creek Telephone Company, but I assure you that we have had no communication or conversation with Cardigan about this matter.
>
> Yours truly,
> Dan Moore.

Moore hadn't written it. Holt Cardigan would have staked his life on that, but it looked like Moore's signature. Cardigan pushed the paper back across the desk. All the futility of this past year had drained him of emotion. There was only a nerve-tight emptiness in him now as he stared at Fleming, as if he were far away and Ezra Fleming was something less than a man, something he could kill without the slightest feeling of remorse.

"This is a fake, Fleming," Cardigan said in a cold, detached way. "Somebody's trying to pin a worse name on me than I've got. When I find out for sure who it is, I'll kill him."

"Don't threaten me," Fleming snapped, "if that's what you're doing. And there's one more thing I want to say while you're here. Jean's engaged to Concho. You used to be sweet on her. Leave her alone, or I'll do the killing."

Cardigan paused at the door, one hand on the knob. "You!" he said contemptuously. "Hell, you're still shaking in your shoes because you pulled a gun on me once. You haven't got the guts to try it again." He went out, shutting the door hard behind him, the echo of the slam making a hollow sound in the great house, and slowly dying.

NOT until he was outside and in the silent darkness of the yard did a sense of reality come back into Cardigan. Dan Moore hadn't written that letter. He couldn't have. In a world that had been dark and grim for Holt Cardigan, the light of two friendships had stood out, those of Pop Yaffee and Dan Moore. He'd gone to college with Moore. They'd worked through the summer on telephone construction jobs. The friendship bonds that held them together were many and strong, and for Moore to repudiate him was impossible.

"Holt." It was Jean, her slim body a faint blur against the picket fence.

Cardigan stopped, not feeling like talking to her and still not wanting to be discourteous. He said, "I thought you'd gone to bed."

"I told you I'd see you before you left." She was close to him now, her presence a heady tonic to him. "I've been wanting to talk to you, Holt."

Cardigan thought, "Don't let yourself go on this, Cardigan. You've got more trouble now than you can manage," and knew he might as well have warned the wind to quit blowing. Of the things he wanted and had failed so completely in attaining, he wanted Jean Fleming most of all. There was here, now, the fragrance of her hair, her nearness that stirred him so deeply, the gentle pressure of her hands upon his arms. The old, sweet recklessness of their high school days was upon them again, shocking them with the knowledge that it was still alive.

Cardigan put his arms around her, and she came to him, lips lifted, and he kissed her. She drew her lips from his, and a bit-

terness was in her voice when she said, "Why didn't you tell me before, Holt?"

He took his arms from her. "How can a man who lives on the bottom of the pile cut himself a piece of happiness with a woman who lives on top?"

"That's silly," she said quickly.

He was holding her left hand, a vagrant gleam of starlight catching the diamond. He said, "Judging by the way you kissed me, you don't love Concho, and if you don't love him, don't marry him."

She held her silence a long moment. Then she said in a low voice that held an undertone of regret, "A promise given is a promise to be kept."

Whether Jean loved Concho Thorn or not, she was not for Holt Cardigan. He told himself that now as he'd told himself a million times since he'd returned to Silver Creek. He was still on the bottom of the pole and she was on the top. He said a little roughly, for hope was never really dead in him, "You'd better break a promise than spend a lifetime hating him."

Her face was a pale oval in the darkness, and again he waited a long moment for her answer. Finally she said, "I'll have to keep it, Holt. I owe Dad that much."

Cardigan didn't understand what Ezra Fleming had to do with it, and he didn't ask. He said, "Your dad isn't worth it."

She caught her breath. "It isn't a question of being worth it. He's my father. Nothing can change that fact." She laid her hand upon his arm again. "He showed you that letter from Moore?"

"It's a fake," Cardigan said sharply.

"There's something going on I don't understand," Jean said. "If I could find out, I could tell you why Dad won't support your telephone company."

"He said he didn't trust me."

"It's more than that. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to Blue Rock to see Moore. He didn't write that letter, and I'm going to bring him back with me to tell your dad that."

"I've got to go in." Her grip tightened on his arm. "Be careful, Holt." Then she was gone, heels clicking on the flagstones until she reached the porch.

For a time Cardigan stood motionless in the gate, slowly building a smoke, and giving careful thought to what he had learned these last minutes. He flicked a match along the post and cupping the flame in his hand, held it to his cigarette. It was then a gun spoke from somewhere along the row of poplars, the bullet slashing Cardigan's scalp and dropping him into a deep, wide pool.

THE first thought Holt Cardigan had when he rose into an aching consciousness was that Ezra Fleming had tried to murder him. Then, slowly, images came to him out of the red haze and he made out Doc Rosser beside the bed, behind him Fleming's narrow, tight-skinned face. He tried to say something, and could not.

"Take it easy, son," the medico said. "Ain't nothing you need to say or nothing you need to do right now."

A lot Doc Rosser knew about that. Cardigan raised a hand to his head, wondering how much of it was still there, felt the bandage, and heard the medico chuckle. "That slug just made a crease in your skull. You lie here a few days, and you'll be all right."

Then Cardigan, remembering the letter, knew he had to see Dan Moore in Blue Rock. That was the way with a sawbones, thinking a man had nothing to do but lie in bed. He saw Jean now, standing over against the wall, and he grinned at her. He brought his gaze back to Rosser. He said, "I'm all right."

"Sure, sure," the medico agreed sourly. "Right just like a cow with a busted neck. In case you never heard about it, head wounds like that are mighty damned touchy. You stay here. Jean will feed you and you've got a good bed."

Cardigan scowled, but he didn't feel like arguing. He said, "Wonder how much Ezra charges for these beds?"

"You don't have to pay anything," Fleming said quickly. "Do you have any idea who shot you, Cardigan?"

"No."

Cardigan thought he saw a look of relief wash across Fleming's face. The banker cleared his throat. "Well, I expect we'd better let the boy sleep, hadn't we, Doc?"

"Just what I was going to say. You don't need to worry about your patient, Jean. Just keep him quiet."

Jean paused at the bed after Fleming and the medico had gone. She whispered, "I'll get word to Moore for you, Holt." Then she blew out the light and slipped out.

There was darkness, complete in its blackness, and silence except for the steady flapping of a blind as a night breeze rattled it through an open window. Cardigan slept, and when he awoke, the light of early morning was penciling a faint line around the blind. It took him a moment to remember what had happened, and when it had come back to him, he stood up, hanging to the bed post until the nausea left him. He might keel over as soon as he got out of the house, but he was dead certain of one thing. He'd never be beholden to Ezra Fleming.

CHAPTER THREE

Sixgun and Sledging Fist

CARDIGAN gently raised the blind, and looked out upon the still sleeping town. The stage left at eight, and head wound or not, Holt Cardigan was taking it. He found his clothes in the closet, dressed, and stood for a moment listening. Hearing no sound but the faint cough of the cook in the distant kitchen, Cardigan slid through the window, and walked rapidly across the yard and along the boardwalk to Pop Yaffee's house behind the livery stable.

Yaffee was taking the coffee pot from the stove as Cardigan appeared on the porch. He called amiably, "You must of smelled this coffee, son." Cardigan came in and dropped into a chair, his legs suddenly weak from the walk. When he took off his hat and Yaffee saw the bandage, he burst out with, "What in hell happened, Holt?"

Cardigan told him, and Yaffee, standing by the stove frying bacon, nodded as he listened. He was a pudgy, little man with a round belly and an untrimmed mustache that gave an otherwise mild face an oddly ferocious look. He was something of a reprobate, judged by the standards of Silver Creek's pious folks, and Cardigan had spent more of his growing-up time in Yaffee's stage office and livery stable than in the shack he'd called home.

"Pull a chair up," Yaffee said when Cardigan was done. "Who you reckon took that shot at you?"

Cardigan filled his plate with flapjacks. "I wouldn't be sure, Pop."

"Fleming maybe?"

"Maybe. Pop, what's the matter with Fleming?"

Yaffee grinned sourly. "Same thing as with most folks who set out to show people how important they are. He's about busted himself doing it."

"How about giving me a free ride to Blue Rock?" Cardigan asked when he'd finished breakfast.

"Sure, and I'll give you a free ride back." Yaffee stacked a pile of gold eagles on the table and shoved it toward Cardigan. "No use starving yourself to death, Holt. One of these days I'm going to need some legal work done, so I might as well start paying for it now."

Cardigan stared at the money, and then raised his eyes to Yaffee's leathery face. "Some day I'll pay you back, Pop."

"Sure you will, Holt, soon as you make this town see who's a white man and who ain't."

Cardigan was the only passenger in the stage to Blue Rock, and he was thankful for that. He slept much of the time, his head aching steadily. He took a hotel room that night, and walked into Dan Moore's office the next morning feeling like his old self.

Moore came out of his seat, hand outstretched, a wide grin across his craggy face. "How are you, Holt? It's good to see you." He waved Cardigan into a chair. "I suppose you're about ready to start stringing wire?"

"Not quite," Cardigan said, and told him what had happened.

Moore listened carefully, a finger tip rubbing a square chin, and when Cardigan mentioned the letter, Moore cut in with, "Holt, I didn't write anything of the sort."

"I didn't think so," Cardigan said, and told about the shooting. "Now I know you're damned busy, Dan, getting the kinks out of this new line, but if you'd come up there and tell Fleming you didn't write that letter, I think something would happen."

"That line is no concern of mine," Moore said. "If those boneheads don't want telephones enough to organize a company and run their wire in here, I say to hell with 'em. Let it go, Holt."

"It's more than that with me, Dan," Cardigan said soberly. "I guess I couldn't tell you how it was if I talked a week. It's just that I want to help. . . . Aw, hell!"

He rose from his chair. "Forget it, Dan."

"I'll go with you," Moore said quickly. "When does the stage pull out?"

"This evening. At six."

When the stage wheeled out of Blue Rock it held one other passenger besides Holt Cardigan and Dan Moore: the gunman, Bucky King. He spoke curtly to Cardigan, took the seat across from him and Moore, and they rode that way in silence through the night hours. Moore sensed the tension, but he said nothing about it until the stage stopped at Hammer's Station. When Cardigan told him about the fight with King, Moore asked, "You think his being on the stage means anything?"

"I wish I knew," Cardigan said worriedly, "and likewise I wish I had my gun."

They rolled on northward, the rimrock to the west making a straight, dark line against the sky, a million stars bright gems placed in a black setting. Cardigan, slouched back in his seat, stared at the indistinct form of the slim gunman and sorted out the reasons that might account for his presence. None of them made very good sense. Holt Cardigan felt like a blindfolded man feeling his way along a sunlit street.

They climbed the long grade of Whetrock Pass and day came, pushing away the shadows from the valleys and bringing light to what had been a black earth. Cardigan sat staring at the cliff below the road that fell away a hundred feet within inches of the coach wheels. Suddenly Moore let out an unintelligible sound that held both fear and anger, and Cardigan turned in the seat to stare at his friend.

"I don't know if you're packing a gun or not, Cardigan," Bucky King breathed, "but I ain't taking no chances. Keep your hands right where they are. You, too, mister." He nodded at Moore. "Kind of hard to keep both of you boys covered, so if you make a wrong move, I'll drill Cardigan and take a chance on getting you next."

King held a gun in his lap, hammer back, muzzle lined on Cardigan's belly. "What's the game, Bucky?" Cardigan asked.

"The game is you're being taken off the stage soon as we hit the top of the grade." King laughed soundlessly, lips coming away from raw, toothless gums. "After what you done to me the other night, Cardigan, this here little chore is gonna be both pleasant and profitable."

Outside a man called, "Pull up. I'm taking the passengers off." The stage braked to a stop, and King said, "Jump out. I hope to hell you make a run for it, Cardigan. Wilder is up there in the rocks with a Winchester, and he'd as soon drill you in the back as from the front."

Cardigan and Moore stepped down, Bucky Wing behind them, his gun in leather now. Wilder called, "All right. Wheel her down, Jud."

The stage careened over the row of the pass and disappeared down the other side. King drew his gun again, and held it on Cardigan, but not until the sound of rapidly turning wheels on rock had been lost in the vast morning stillness did Zane Wilder come around a rocky upthrust. He was leading three horses, a malicious grin flattening his lips against yellow teeth.

"Sure happy to see you this beautiful morning, Cardigan," Wilder said, his green eyes holding a mocking wickedness. "Hear the birds singing? See them purty flowers? If you don't, you'd better start listening and looking, 'cause you might not be listening and looking by another sunrise."

"A profitable and pleasant job, is it?" Cardigan murmured. "Just who made it profitable?"

"Who?" Wilder leaned forward in the saddle. "Now wouldn't you like to know?"

"Hell, tell him," Bucky King said, "and then we'll ride."

"Sure. He might as well know." Wilder winked at King. "Ezra Fleming pays real well for jobs like this, and Cardigan, that purty girl of his played you for a sucker. Nobody would have knowed why you lit out for Blue Rock if she hadn't told her dad you were going after Moore."

IT WAS mid-day when they dropped into a deep, steep-walled canyon not more than five miles south of Silver Creek. They twisted through the pines for another mile before they pulled up in front of a deserted homesteader's cabin. Cardigan had been here hunting the previous fall, and he remembered the place.

"Get down," King ordered, "and get inside. You're staying here till the boss shows up."

"When'll that be?" Moore demanded.

Wilder laughed. "Ain't in a hurry, are you, mister? Why, he might be here tonight, and then again, he might not." He kicked the door open. "Sit down." He motioned toward two rawhide bottom chairs. "Make yourselves comfortable while we tie you up."

Wilder lashed them into the chairs while King held a gun on them. Then Wilder built a fire and cooked a meal, but when Moore asked for something to eat, King laughed. "Sorry we ain't got none too spare, friend." He looked at his watch. "I'd better hit for town, Zane."

The two men talked outside the cabin for a time, their voices an indistinct hum to Cardigan. "It's a hell of a note to have got you into this, Dan," Cardigan said. "If I'd had. . . ."

"Forget it," Moore grunted. "You didn't know. Anyhow, our heads will roll together."

All morning Cardigan had ridden blindly, unaware of what went on around him, conscious only of the one impossible thing Wilder had told him. Jean Fleming had sold him out. Yet, with that knowledge was the certainty she could not have done it. There was the constant pressure of his thoughts as he went back again over those moments he had spent with Jean before he had been shot. Believing in her as he did, he could not escape this fact: she was the only one who knew he was going to Blue Rock to get Dan Moore.

"What's the game, Holt?" Moore asked. "Men don't take a chance on murder unless the stake's big enough to warrant it."

Moore's words brought Cardigan's mind back to this moment. He heard the voices outside again, louder now as if Wilder and King were arguing. He heard King say, "Hell, he licked you once and he can do it again. You hold a gun on him. . . ." King's voice dropped into an indistinguishable murmur.

"I think I know how to get out of here, Dan," Cardigan said. "If we can get into town we'll work Fleming over till we find out what this is all about. Just give me a boost when I start the play."

A moment later Wilder came in, and Cardigan heard the run of a horse gradually dying in the distance. Wilder leaned against the door jamb, the sun cutting sharply across his knobby face, two red spots on his cheeks showing the anger that was still burning in him.

"You know, Zane," Cardigan said, "I sort of had you pegged for a tough hand, just seeing you around town, but the way you went out the other night when I tapped you, I guess you aren't tough at all."

Wilder turned sullen eyes on him. "Keep your mug shut, Cardigan, or I'll show you how tough I am."

"With me tied to a chair?" Cardigan laughed scornfully. "Cut me loose and I'll knock you cold!"

"You'd like to have me cut you loose, wouldn't you?" Wilder snarled.

"Afraid?" Cardigan demanded.

"No. King just told me to stand here with a gun in my hand."

"So King runs the team," Moore said as if he didn't quite believe it. "I sure had you sized up wrong. I figured you were the one who gave the orders."

"Aw, Bucky's too big for his britches." Wilder dug a match from his pocket and chewed on it. "I ain't afraid of you, Cardigan, but if Bucky found out I'd cut you loose just to lick you, he'd kill me."

But Zane Wilder's pugilistic pride had been badly injured by Cardigan's punch, and Cardigan, watching him now, saw the struggle that was going on in the man's mind. He let the silence run for a time. Then he said, "I got shot in Silver Creek. I haven't had anything to eat since last night. I've been tied up here for an hour, but I can still lick hell out of you, Wilder."

The outlaw snarled an oath, and pulled a long-bladed knife from his pocket. "Cardigan, I'm gonna bust you up so even that purty Fleming gal won't know you." He pulled Moore back against the wall, slashed the ropes that bound Cardigan and tossed the knife to the table. "Feller, I'm gonna make you sorry you ever thought of this."

Wilder unbuckled his gun belt, laid it beside the knife, and wheeling, came at Cardigan, great fists swinging, a confident grin on his thick-lipped mouth. Cardigan faded back, flexing his arm muscles and knowing that he had to work the stiffness out before he came to grips with the big man. He was like a shadow, wheeling aside, ducking, dodging, flicking out a fist and feinting.

"Stand still and fight," Wilder snarled. "You fight like a flea."

HOLT CARDIGAN had been fighting somebody for as long as he could remember, but he had never had a fight where the stakes were as high as this. If Zane Wilder won, Cardigan would be disfigured for life, which didn't matter much because his life would be a short one.

Wilder was puffing now from his pursuit, and a rising anger was prodding him into careless moments. It was in such an unguarded moment that Wilder, trying to pin Cardigan against the wall only to find he had slipped away again, came hard against it, and as he turned, Cardigan reversed his tactics and came at him, his right catching Wilder on the side of the head and spinning him half around.

The big man was hurt. He was slammed back against the wall, half-dazed, great hands outstretched and reaching for Cardigan and missing. Cardigan held his ground now, driving blows at Wilder's chest and kidneys and face and taking heavy toll. Wilder gave ground, and then, back almost to the wall, got in a blow to Cardigan's head that nearly tore it from his neck. Cardigan fell against the table and rolled off, and Wilder jumped at him, aiming to smash his ribs with heavy boots. Moore called out a warning, fear adding a shrill note to his voice. Cardigan was dazed, but sensing the big man's intent, he rolled under the table and came up on the other side, shaking the cobwebs out of his head and gaining a moment's respite.

Wilder let out a roar, and rushed around the table. Cardigan ran away from him for one turn around the table, and then wheeling with unexpected suddenness, came against Wilder, tying him up and wrestling with him. They swung across the room in an awkward dance, each straining against the other, hit the hot stove and shoved it against the wall, the pipe coming down with a crash and spreading a black rain around the room. Wilder, pressed against the stove, let out a squall of agony and plunged away. Cardigan, his arms suddenly free, caught Wilder on the jaw with a long, looping right and knocked him hard against the wall, the cabin trembling with the impact of his body. He bounced away and, unbalanced, fell to the floor.

Wilder came back to his feet, a sick, hurt look on his knobby face that was covered now with soot, bruises and blood. Swaying unsteadily, he moved forward, great fists clubbing at Cardigan. Cardigan, sensing this was the moment, drove a cruel, upswinging fist to his jaw. Wilder's head snapped back and he went down, joints giving away so that he fell flat out like a tent with all the anchoring stakes pulled up in the same instant.

Cardigan stumbled across the room, gulping in great gasps of air, reached the door and stood leaning against the jamb. He wiped the blood and soot from his face, staring at the unconscious Wilder, and feeling a sudden weakness crawl through him. He was farther gone than he had realized.

Cardigan picked up the knife Wilder had dropped there and cut Moore loose. They tied Wilder's hands and feet, and Cardigan dropped into a chair. "Want to cook up some grub before we travel, Dan? I kind of feel like resting. I don't think King will be back with Fleming for a spell."

Moore said, "You bet." Replacing the pipe, he stoked up the fire. "Holt, it strikes me Fleming must have a mighty big reason for keeping a telephone line out of Silver Creek, or he wouldn't hire a couple of toughs like this. Anyway you look at it, he was running a chance. Doesn't make sense for a man in his position."

"I hope it isn't Fleming," Cardigan said. He didn't put it into words, but there was a bigger hope in him, that it wasn't Jean who had tipped King and Wilder off to where he was going.

"Hell, they said Fleming was their boss."

"I know." Cardigan wiped the back of a hand across his cheek and brought it away, blood-streaked. "There might be somebody else who wants Fleming dead. This way he'd kill two birds with one stone. They've got me rigged to plug Fleming, and then I'd get my neck stretched."

"Why would anybody want Fleming dead?"

"Because he said he'd sponsor a telephone line himself when I was finished, which means that before too long there would be a line into Silver Creek. With both of us gone, there wouldn't be anybody else to push the project."

Moore turned away from the stove, his face puzzled. "I'm still asking why anybody would be that anxious to keep a telephone line out of the country."

"That I don't know," Cardigan said slowly. "I've been thinking we'd hit town about dark. When word gets around that we're there and have contacted Fleming, we'll know who's playing tag with us."

They rode out half an hour later Cardigan taking Zane Wilder's gun and leaving him conscious, bound, and cursing. They tarried in the pines south of town until dusk, and came into Silver Creek when it was fully dark.

"I've got a gun in my room," Cardigan said. "I'd better get it before we talk to Fleming."

THE short main street lay before them, ruts half-filled with dust, utterly dark except for the lighted windows of the Prairie Bar and the hotel, and completely deserted. Then Cardigan, eyes raking the street, muttered a low curse. There was a light in his office over the bank.

They reined their mounts into the alley behind the bank, Cardigan pondering what he had seen and finding no more sense in it than the other things that had happened. They pulled up at the rear of the bank, and swinging down, stood listening. Complete silence was upon the town, a grim silence that pressed against Cardigan and filled him with foreboding.

There were both front and back stairs to the second story of the bank building. Cardigan, thinking swiftly of this now, felt a growing certainty that one or both of the stairways held a gun trap. Bucky King would have had time to ride to town, contact his boss, and get back to find the prisoners gone, then ride into town again with Wilder. Cardigan, trying to see it the way King would, decided the gunman had broken the office door open and lighted the lamp, thinking Cardigan would see and rush up the stairs to meet a hail of lead. The back stairs, then, would most likely be unguarded.

"Fleming's house is a couple of blocks north of here," Cardigan whispered. "Big house on a knoll and a picket fence along the front. You can't miss it. You go up there and square off with him. See what he's got to say."

"Just what are you going to do while I chat with Mr. Fleming?" Moore demanded.

"Oh, I've got a little business in my office. I just thought it would be better, seeing as Fleming doesn't think very highly of me, that you talk to him first."

"Your mind is as easy to read as a first grade primer," Moore said sourly. "You want me out of the way if you run into some shooting. I'm not going, Holt."

"All right," Cardigan said. "Keep quiet on the stairs."

They were almost to the top before they stepped on a loose board, the squeak terrifyingly loud in the silence. They paused, listening, and hearing nothing, moved on along the pit-black hall to Cardigan's office door. Drawing Wilder's gun, Cardigan eased back the hammer and turned the knob. He kicked the door open, and went in fast. Then breath came out of him in a gusty sigh. The only man in the room was Pop Yaffee, pulling patiently on his evil-smelling pipe, surprise mirrored in his face at the manner of Cardigan's entry.

"What in hell's biting you?" the old man demanded in a disgusted tone. "You come in here like you was ready to start shooting."

"I was," Cardigan admitted. "I thought it was somebody else."

"Well, it ain't. Nobody here but me."

Cardigan stepped into the room and introduced Moore to Yaffee.

"Dan Moore, eh?" Yaffee shook hands and broke into a cackle. "Well, now, that's mighty fine for you to be here, Mr. Moore. 'cause I figger before long we'll have a telephone line into Silver Creek, and you can give us a hand while you're here." He tapped his briar against his heal, letting the ashes spill on the floor. "Take chairs, boys, and listen to a yarn. While you've been running around, I found out why you've had such a hell of a time getting a telephone company organized."

CHAPTER FOUR

Crawfish or Die!

CARDIGAN sat down, staring at Yaffee and feeling a sudden weakness rush through him, a reaction from the tension of the last few minutes.

"We know who the man is," Moore said. "A couple of toughs named King and Wilder took us off the stage, and they said Ezra Fleming was their boss."

Yaffee spat through the open window.

"I figgered it was them two that got you, Holt, when the stage driver told what had happened. But likewise I figgered you was smart enough to give 'em the slip, and come here. Nope, it ain't Ezra, though he could have put a stop to all this monkey business a long time ago."

"He saw a good chance to cook my goose here in town," Cardigan said sourly. "He didn't want me seeing Jean, and maybe he wanted whatever glory there was in getting the telephone line going."

"And profit. But hell, this talk about how you weren't to be trusted and how you were going to grab the dinero that folks subscribed was all started in the last few weeks. That talk was started for a purpose, Holt, by Ezra Fleming because he figgered he had to do it, and I'm thinking Jean's gonna hate her dad all her life because of what he's done."

"I don't think anybody ever made Ezra do something he didn't want to," Cardigan said dryly. He handed Wilder's gun to Moore and took his own and a handful of shells out of the desk. "Just in case Pop sends us coyote hunting, Dan."

"Just what I'm going to do." Yaffee began filling his pipe. "First, I'm going to tell you about Fleming. I've knowed him all his life, and he's honest. I'll say that for him, and folks trust him. Just the same, he wanted to make a fine show. So he built that house, and it cooked him. Price of beef went down, we had some hard times, and Ezra's bank was in trouble. He didn't have any money to fall back on. It was all in his big house, so when a jayhoo came along with some dinero and gave him a boost, he took it. Then that same jayhoo wanted you gossiped out of the country when you started talking telephones, and it danged near worked."

Cardigan sat staring at Pop Yaffee, his gun held on his lap, knowing what the old man meant, and still not seeing the reason for the things that had happened. He said, "If you've got proof, Pop, we'd better get the sheriff from Blue Rock. If you haven't. . . ."

"I've got proof, and we don't need no sheriff. I've writ more letters in the last year than I ever did in my life trying to pick up Concho Thorn's back trail. I'm just naturally suspicious of a feller who comes in and makes a big splash like he done, making love to the banker's daughter and getting all the other girls in town excited. Took me a year, but I finally done her, and then I knowed why Thorn didn't want a telephone line in here from Blue Rock which hooks up with Reno. I got the letters on the stage you boys was lifted off of."

Yaffee struck a match and held it to his pipe. "You'll remember last fall after Thorn hadn't been here very long, he bought a lot of cattle. There were three or four other buyers who came in, but they didn't stay long, mostly because Thorn paid just a little above the market. He took a loss driving out to Redding. Not a big loss, but a loss, his game being to make the ranchers around here think he was willing to shave his own profits to give them a square deal.

"I've got good enough descriptions to prove Thorn, under other names, did the same job in out of the way places in Montana and New Mexico that he's doing here, and he made plenty. He'll buy up a big herd, but he'll put on a song and dance about prices going to hell, and he'll buy at about five dollars a head under the market. Well, Fleming's behind him, folks naturally take to Thorn, and not having a phone so they can call up on late prices, they'll take what he offers. Maybe Fleming even puts on a little pressure, saying he's collecting on what they owe him, which most of 'em do. About ten thousand head will go out of this country this fall, which figgers to make Mr. Concho Thorn a nice chunk of dinero. With a phone line in here, somebody would spike his scheme sure."

"A purty cute one," Yaffee agreed, "but a country would have to be isolated to make it work. Fleming has sent out notices to the ranchers for a meeting. It'll help if you talk to 'em, Moore. This makes a damned good argument why they need phones."

Cardigan heard a man running along the hall. Almost in the same instant a gun blazed from the darkness outside the door, its roar thunder-loud in the narrow confines of the passage. Yaffee clutched his shirt front, and fell sideways.

Cardigan had been so surprised to see Yaffee when he came in that he hadn't thought about closing the door. It had remained open for Concho Thorn or whoever was out there to hear everything that

had been said. Cardigan snuffed out the lamp with a single shot, and plunged low through the doorway as the gun spoke again, the bullet singing above him, the blaze of the shot a red, darting ribbon in the darkness. Cardigan's gun sounded then, five times. He spread his lead the width of the hall and then held his fire, lying belly-flat on the floor, and heard the man die.

Cardigan thumbed new loads into his gun. He called, "Light the lamp and take a look at Pop, Dan." Then Cardigan, gun in hand, raced down the front stairs and into the thin light of the street, knowing he was making a target out of himself and knowing he had no choice, for Ezra Fleming would die unless a miracle brought Holt Cardigan to the big house in time to save him.

Racing along the boardwalk, stumbling as his feet struck loose boards, Cardigan came to the row of poplars that fronted Fleming's house, saw the lighted front windows and another in the back which would be the banker's den. He paused, not certain what his course of action should be. It was fantastic to think that Concho Thorn would murder Fleming in his own house, unless, and the thought sent a chill along his spine, Thorn framed somebody else for the murder. That somebody would likely be Holt Cardigan.

Cardigan went on, leaping the picket fence and angling across the yard. He stepped across the porch, softly now, and saw in the thin light of the bracket hall lamp the skinny form of Bucky King. Cardigan had come the length of the porch and not directly from the front. King, seeing Cardigan, swore in surprise and brought his gun up, but he didn't fire. Cardigan's gun barrel caught his head in a sweeping downstroke, smashing consciousness from him. Cardigan eased his body to the floor, tossed his gun into the yard, and catfooted on along the long, narrow hall to Fleming's den.

"I'd given you every chance, Fleming," Thorn was saying coldly, "and still you let Yaffee talk you into blabbing your head off. You just committed suicide when you sent out those notices. Cardigan will have a hard time proving he didn't beef you after I leave a few. . . ."

"A few what, Concho?" Cardigan asked from the doorway.

Thorn whirled, gun in hand, and for just a moment surprise showed on his handsome face. His gun lifted and fired as Cardigan squeezed trigger. Then the light went out for Holt Cardigan as Thorn's bullet slammed into his chest and drove him out of the doorway and against the wall. He fell, face down on the carpet.

THE Fleming house became a hospital, and Doc Rosser spent more time there than in all the rest of Silver Creek put together. When Cardigan could listen, Dan Moore sat beside the bed and told him what had happened.

"Pop Yaffee's getting along fine. Doc lit out soon as he heard the shooting and got there in time to stop the bleeding. Then the fight got going up here, and Doc lit out again. Sure busy that night."

Moore had been grinning, but he sobered now. "You know, Holt, you plugged Thorn, but you didn't kill him. Fleming did that. He wrote the full story of what Thorn was up to, and the paper printed it with Bucky King's statement. What's more, Fleming talked up for the telephone company when they had the ranchers' meeting, they organized the company, and all the capital stock is subscribed."

"How did Fleming get that fake letter from you?"

"Thorn wrote it. He was an artist with a pen, and he copied my signature. Fleming had given Thorn his letter to me, which he threw away. Then he had the fake letter mailed in Blue Rock."

"What about Fleming? Folks figure he was helping Thorn pull this off?"

"No, and I don't think he did. Oh, one more thing. Thorn was standing along the fence when you told Jean where you were going. After she went into the house he creased you."

It was a good world, Cardigan was thinking after Moore left, when a man had friends like Pop Yaffee and Dan Moore and when he loved a girl like Jean. He was thinking about her when she came in. He reached out for her hand as he said, "I was just having some nice thoughts about you. Things will be different from now on."

THE END

HEAL 'EM AND HANG 'EM!

When Doc Elkins rode out on his mercy mission to help a bullet-bitten killer, he meant to do a thorough job —if he had to shoot every honest stage driver along the Concord trails to make his cure stick!

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

HARD bootheels scraping furtively along the rough pine flooring awakened Dr. Elkins from a light sleep. He sat up in bed, listening, and reached as silently as he could for the gun which, in its belted holster, hung over a chair. Twice before, drunken cowboys had invaded the Frontier Hotel, where Doc lived, and rousted the guests out into the night. Doc had made up his mind it would not happen again.

But this was different. These feet were not reeling alcoholically along the hall. Someone was trying to tiptoe. Doc heard a match scrape on his door, and a yellow flicker warmed his transom.

"This is his room," a voice muttered. "Don't knock! Let's see if the son-of-a-gun locks his door."

Doc eased out of bed and slipped the gun out of its holster. He tiptoed to the door, trying to remember whether or not he had locked it. In the uncertain night light he saw the knob turn furtively.

The door inched open. Doc stuck a long arm out and reached for the knob. The door swung open just then. Whoever was on the other side was a quick thinker.

Doc saw the gun, but too late to do anything about it. Swung by a short, brawny arm, the weapon came down on his forearm with crushing force. The arm went numb. Doc raised the gun in his other hand. The door was flung open, and he got a glimpse of two men, in dark range clothing, pushing at him from the hall. Up went that short, muscular arm again. The gun came down in a swift arc. Doc tried to dodge, and at the same time to jam his own gun into the other's stomach.

White, blinding light dazzled him as the gun struck his forehead. He felt his knees buckle. He lost his gun, despite the strained, agonized effort he made to cling to it.

"Don't let him drop and make a lot of

White, blinding light flashed around him, as the gun caught Doc on the forehead.

racket, Shorty," said a harsh voice near his ear. "That's the stuff—ease him down gently. I'll heft him outside now, and you find his bag. Grab everything you see. Lots of medicine. And let's get out of here."

That was the last thing Doc remembered.

Later, he was to recall being jounced around the back end of a spring wagon for endless hours over rough roads—or no roads at all. He remembered, dimly, being transferred with rough gentleness from the spring wagon to the back of a horse, and he had sense enough to hang onto the saddle horn. The horse was wild, but a harsh hand held the lead-rope which was attached to his bridle rings, and now and then someone reached out to steady Doc in the saddle.

It was almost morning when his head cleared enough for him to know where he was. In the gray pre-dawn light, he saw they were climbing steadily up into the Sierras, and by the position of the light portion of the sky, heading northward.

There were two men with him. The man at the lead-rope of his horse was small, hump-backed, nondescript, tobacco-chewing. This would be Shorty. He could be anybody—the West was full of such characters.

The man riding at his side—or behind him when the steep trail narrowed—was a different type. Burly as a barrel, black-whiskered, thick-armed, he looked powerful of body and will. And, as Doc's wits returned, he puzzled deeply over a certain familiarity in the fellow. Where had he seen him before? He couldn't remember. But then, Fulkerson was a busy town lately, with immigrant wagons heading for the coastal valleys, freight teams pushing endless caravans both ways, and fat herds from the fall round-ups streaming eastward toward the railhead.

"Feelin' better, Doc?" the man beside him drawled gruffly.

The kindness in the harsh voice angered Doc. Smash a man on the head and then sympathize with him!

"Yes, no thanks to you," he said, shortly. "I reckon you've got a reason for this. I never did you no harm."

The burly man kept his temper. He even seemed apologetic.

"Got a reason, all right," he said. "Got a man bad sick up here. Shot in the stummick, and it festered. He's all swoll up."

"That's no excuse for cracking my skull!" the doctor shot back. "Why didn't you bring him down to me? Why didn't you ask like a white man? I'm never too busy to ride out for a day or two."

The burly man looked at him queerly and said, "There was reasons. I thought you knowed."

And suddenly Doc knew them. He had paid little attention to the hullabaloo over the Mayolle gang. His business was healing people, not catching them. But Sheriff Dan Ackerman had been out for a week, with posses ranging as much as fifty miles in all directions, ever since the Mayolle gang stuck up the mail wagon over at White Point. That was where he had seen the familiar face—on "Wanted" dodgers, which were nailed to every tree and fence post in town.

He shot a glance at the big man. This would be Junius Mayolle, youngest and toughest of the gang. Tuck Mayolle, his elder brother, was cruel and vicious, more so than Junius, but it was the younger one whose bone-crushing strength had literally torn two jails apart.

"Tuck thinks up meannness to get into," people said, "and Junius gets them out. And they make it pay, too!"

THE rest of the gang—and they always traveled with at least four or five men—were nondescript cowboys with a dislike for work and a love for easy money. They wanted to be "bad men," because, like Shorty up ahead, they lacked the stuff to amount to anything any other way.

"We'll set you free with the biggest fee you ever earned, Doc," Junius said, perceiving that the doctor understood at last. "Just get my brother on his feet again—that's all we ask."

"What about my other patients?" the doctor said, wrathfully. "It may take weeks, if it's an abdominal wound."

"They'll just have to wait," said Junius. "Folks got along without a doctor up to three-four years ago. They can get along without one now."

He straightened in the saddle, and his manner changed. The gruff geniality left his voice.

"I got to drop back a piece," he said. "You kin holt on by yourself now. See you don't try nothin' smart. Shorty, I'm

leavin' you for a minute. Don't let the doc get away."

"All right, Junius," said Shorty. "I'll ride behind. Doc, you just keep that tall pine up there between your cayuse's ears and keep goin'. Don't get no ideas, because you heered what Junius said."

Junius whirled his horse and set off recklessly down the slope. The pines swallowed him. Shorty pulled to one side and threw the lead-rope of Doc's horse over the horse's neck. Doc took the reins, which had been looped around the saddle horn. His head throbbed miserably, but he could keep his balance.

He aimed at the pine until Shorty abruptly gave him another landmark an hour later. This time it was a V-shaped cleft which, as daylight broke, became the mouth of a huge, rising canyon. They had been climbing steadily, and Doc had no idea where they were except—vaguely—that they were north of Fulkerson.

As time went on, Shorty seemed to be getting uneasy. He kept glancing at his watch. Near mid-morning he told Doc to pull up and wait. Doc did so, and watched furtively out of the corner of his eye. Shorty was chewing his lip nervously, in a worried, undecided manner.

"This is as far as his instructions go," Doc said to himself, "and evidently something has delayed friend Junius. Nothing pleasant has happened to him, I hope!"

Eventually Shorty told him to ride on. Despite the lateness of the hour and the brightness of the sun, they were near enough to the snow-line to chill the air. His head had stopped pounding, and Doc was getting hungry. Twice he suggested that they help themselves to something from Shorty's stuffed saddlebags, but both times Shorty refused curtly.

They had reached the top of the canyon, and Shorty's indecision had become almost pitiful, when far below them they heard the labored breathing of a horse. Shorty put his finger to his lips and slipped his gun out of the holster. Then, perhaps surprising a gleam in Doc's eye, he slid out of the saddle and grabbed Doc's horse by the head.

"Get down," he said, "and get over behind that tree—and keep your mouth shut!"

The horse came toward them, climbing fast and panting hard. Shorty waited with his gun steady. In a moment, Junius Mayolle appeared out of the dark, piney shadows. Shorty heaved a huge sigh of relief and holstered the gun. Junius showed anger on his dark face until Shorty motioned the doctor out from behind the tree.

"They picked up our trail this side of the fork and they're fanned out down there on Wilson's Flat," said Junius. "But I don't know whether they're still on our trail or just lucky. They didn't seem to know where they was goin'. Why ain't you boys et yet? Shorty, you ain't got a lick of sense!"

He rolled out of his saddle and lit heavily. Obviously it had been a gruelling ride, but his burly frame seemed untouched by it. He set to work gathering brush for a fire.

"Ef they're close onto us, Junius, mebbe we hadn't ort to eat. Leastwise, hadn't ort to build no fire," said Shorty, uneasily.

"Man's got to eat," said Junius, "and what's grub without coffee? Reckon we'll meet whatever comes. They didn't seem to know what they was doin'."

Junius had a quart coffee pot tied to his saddle. He brewed coffee on a tiny fire, and they munched cold cornbread and cold tortillas and drank scalding coffee. Then Junius kicked out the fire, covered it so skillfully that Doc could not believe one had existed, and ordered them to their horses.

With Junius in command, they traveled swiftly now. They plunged down the center of the canyon until a spring-fed stream appeared. They crossed the stream and mounted the canyon wall at right angles, and crossed the ridge less than a quarter of a mile from where they had eaten breakfast. They were going two feet for every one foot of actual distance, doubling on their trail and redoubling again like a wise old fox.

Once Doc thought he heard a gunshot far behind them, and he looked at Shorty, but the little man was lost in his own thoughts. If Junius Mayolle, up ahead, heard it, his broad back gave no clue.

IT WAS night when they reached the first sign to show Doc they were almost there. A man appeared on the high mountainside to their right and came down to-

ward the trail ahead of them. He waved, and Junius waved back. The man waited for them. He was another like Shorty, although not quite so much of a nobody. Junius called him "Speed."

"How's Tuck, Speed?" said Junius.

"Out of his haid, Juny," said Speed, in a lazy Missouri drawl. "His end is nigh, I bet a purty. You had your trip for nothin'. How was it with you?"

Junius swore bitterly.

"Tuck'll die when he dies, and don't you go gossipin'," he snarled. "Get back up there and keep your eyes peeled. They follered me as far as Wilson's Flat. They may pick up the trail. Doc's got to have a chance to pull Tuck out'n this before we can resk havin' to run."

"All right, Juny," Speed said, "but the boys ain't goin' to like havin' a posse drawed this closet to them, jest so's you can get a doc for a man that's good as daid anyhow. You never taken no such trouble for nobody else."

Junius swore again and struck at Speed. Speed dug the spurs into his horse and bounded back up the hill, all the fight gone from him. Junius grinned savagely at Doc.

"Sets up there keepin' sentry and thinkin', and gets purty smart," he said, "but I takes the back of my hand to him and he recollects who is boss. Now watch your step in the dark, Doc. 'Tain't fur, but it's a holy terror of a trail."

They suddenly began climbing again, but it had grown so dark that Doc could see nothing. However, he had a feeling that a huge cliff towered above him to the right, and that to the left was—nothing. He let his horse pick his own way, and the animal moved cautiously, at a snail's pace, picking a spot carefully for each hoof before setting it down.

A man suddenly loomed up against the starless horizon ahead of him. He said something in a low voice, and Junius answered him. Behind, Shorty suddenly seemed to come awake. He began humming cheerfully. The man led the way, and the horses began to move faster.

Then a light twinkled not far ahead, and Doc saw three men get up from around a campfire. The three stood waiting expectantly as they rode in. Junius jumped off his horse and tossed the reins to one of the waiting men.

"How is he?" he said anxiously.

"Bad!" said the man.

Junius motioned, and the Doc followed him back into the shadows. Shorty came after them, carrying the Doc's bag and the sackfull of medicines they had scooped up in his room.

Tuck Mayole was lying on a pallet, cushioned with many blankets and layers of grass and pine cones. He was shorter than Junius, and stronger looking. He was bare to the waist, and the ropy muscles stood out on his hairy body like corded wood. Doc was aching with weariness, but the sight of the man's distended abdomen stirred his professional interest.

"Get me a light, quick," he said.

He knelt and prodded the unconscious man. Tuck groaned, a far-off, burbling sound. Doc's fingers explored the man's trunk as best he could in the flickering campfire light until Junius came back with a pitchwood torch.

"This do, Doc?" he said.

"A dozen of them might do, you fool," the doctor said angrily. "I need light, lots of it!"

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he wondered what Junius would do to him. But the big man merely turned and grunted to the others, and they scurried off. In a few moments, Doc was ringed with blazing torches, each man holding two.

He bathed the wound with icy water from the creek. There was only an entrance hole; that meant he still had the slug in him. Doc opened his case and laid out his instruments. He looked up once and saw Junius blinking in horrified fascination at those gleaming blades. Doc smiled.

"You'd better sit on his head and hold his arms, and a couple of you take his feet so he can't move. It's going to hurt him and wake him up when I cut," he said.

Junius went white.

"Cain't you—cain't you give him something?" he murmured. "Just cain't cut a livin' man thataway."

"I had chloroform and opium in my room," said the doctor, "but you picked out what you wanted brought—I didn't! What you lacked in brains must be made up in brawn. Hold him!"

They held him. Tuck writhed and howled when the doctor, with a quick slice, laid open the abdomen. The inside of the wound

was crawling with infection. Peritonitis? He could not be sure whether it had spread to the whole of the abdominal cavity or not. There was nothing he could do about it if it was true.

ONE by one, each of the men had to slip off into the brush and indulge their sick stomachs—all but Junius. Sweat popped out on the big man's face, which was chalk-white. Doc knew it would be harder on him than anyone, because the patient was his brother. But Junius stayed!

Doc cut away the infected flesh, cauterized as deeply as he could with an iron spoon heated red-hot, and packed the wound with gauze. The operation took an hour. Several times he thought Tuck's heart had stopped, and before he was through he had a lot of respect for that heart! Tuck had tremendous vitality. It was like working on a sick bull.

"Ain't you goin' to sew him up?" Junius said, when at last the doctor was through. Tuck had fainted dead away, and lay limp. "He'll dump his whole insides out the first time he moves."

"He'd better not move!" the doctor said. "I want that wound to drain. If he can lick the infection, time enough to stitch him up. If he can't—well, you can just bury him that way. But—you see that he doesn't move!"

All night they kept vigil, and hourly the doctor was more amazed at the huge reserves of animal strength in Tuck Mayolle. The man had a crafty, vicious, ugly face, a face as ugly as his reputation. He was wanted for several senseless killings. He seemed to lose his head after a successful robbery, it was said, killing people when there was no need for it.

And all the next day they watched, while Tuck's life hovered on every breath that burbled out of his slack lips. Junius asked the doctor for his opinion, and the doctor refused to give it, every ten minutes.

"He should have been dead long ago," he snarled at last. "I've done all I can. I'm still doing it. He defies medical science, and lives yet. Shut up!"

"I'm sorry, Doc," Junius said humbly.

And Tuck lived another night—and another day—and still another night. When Junius awoke from his exhausted sleep the following morning, it was to his brother's continuous, high-pitched groans. He looked up and saw Doc kneeling over the recumbent man. Doc looked over his shoulder.

"Sewing him up," he said. "And then I'm going to get some sleep myself. Look lively now—you've got to take charge."

Tuck was awake, and conscious. The flesh had fallen away from him all over, leaving his short, big-boned frame cadaverously thin. But Doc shivered at the look in the man's eyes. He had lost weight, he had a powerful constitution and the heart of a range bull, but illness had not purged the meanness out of him.

Not one word of thanks did he receive from his patient. Tuck's eyes never left the doctor. They followed him suspiciously wherever he went until, at last Doc stretched out on the grass and closed his eyes . . . just for a minute. . . .

He slept fourteen hours.

He awoke to a wailing sound that kept on and on, like the cry of an abused child. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. It took him a few moments to realize where he was. Slowly, it all came back to him.

There lay Tuck Mayolle, white, gaunt, and menacing even on his back. Beside him lay the man called Speed. It was from Speed that the wailing sound issued. No one else was in sight, but from all around came the steady sound of gunfire.

"Posse caught up with us!" said Doc.

He scrambled to Speed's side. The Missourian had been shot in the throat. Even as Doc put his hands on him, he knew it was too late. Tuck snarled at him, "Let go of him! He let them get through. Serves him right!"

"Shut up," said the doctor.

He sat there and watched Speed die. When he folded the dead bandit's arms over his chest, he caught a glint of sadistic satisfaction in the outlaw leader's eyes. He shivered as he approached Tuck, who lay back to let his wound be examined. Doc changed the dressing, marvelling at what he saw. It was healing quickly.

Junius Mayolle came running toward them, crouching low. Bullets whined over him, but he paid no attention to them. He scooped up ammunition from an open box, filling both pockets.

"They're all around us, Doc," he panted, "but don't start cheerin'. It's not the sheriff. It's a bunch of them crazy teamsters,

and they're already talkin' lynchin'." He smiled drily. "They know you're here, too, Doc, and they wonder how come. I didn't enlighten 'em none. Matter of fact, they're right smart hot under the collar at you. I wouldn't venture out none, if I was you."

"You let them think I came willingly," said the doctor. "You made me a party to this."

Junius nodded to his brother and said, "Tuck comes first. You'll get a fat fee when he's well. Until then—"

He vanished. The doctor went back and sat beside Tuck. The invalid bandit leader grinned from time to time, obviously enjoying the doctor's discomfiture. He had a strange, twisted, malevolent sense of humor.

"You better not let anything happen to me," he chuckled once, "or you know what Juny will do to you."

Junius, it appeared quickly, was an old hand at this sort of game. He had only four men beside himself, now that Speed was dead, but they had ammunition and arms for a regiment. Junius had deployed them brilliantly, so that they covered every approach to the camp without themselves being seen. There was food enough to last them for a long siege.

"All I want," said Junius, once, "is to stall them off until that dumb sheriff gets here. He's great for law and order. He won't stand for a necktie party. He'll palaver—and then maybe I'll think of something else."

But he seemed worried, nevertheless, and Doc, listening to the yells all around them, knew why. The teamsters' blood was up, and many of them were more than half drunk. Tuck Mayolle's last victim had been one of their number. The driver of the mail wagon had been cut down in cold blood by Tuck's .45, fired after it was all over, within a foot of the man's head.

THE doctor had spent his life healing people, and he shivered at the bloodthirsty cries which rang on every side. Men called across the canyon to each other, describing what they intended to do to Tuck Mayolle when they caught him. As the afternoon wore on, their fury seemed to mount. They wasted ammunition recklessly, and some of the shots came dangerously close to where the doctor crouched with his grim patient. He heard his own name called several times. That they would string him up, too, he had no doubt.

He crept to Junius Mayolle's side, where the big man lay taking it easy behind a rock barricade which, in turn, was screened by greenery. Junius had a rifle which he fired methodically, covering his share of the fight with machine-like diligence. His face twisted as the doctor neared him.

"How's Tuck?"

"All right. He's cool enough, and that helps keep his fever down. Any sign of the sheriff?"

"Buck, up on the knob, yelled down he thought he saw him crossing Meredith Ridge a while ago. Thought he recognized the sheriff's spotted horse, through his glass. That would put him about an hour away."

"Then—?"

"We'll see. Tuck and I have busted out of jails before." A frown crossed his face. "I only hope we can hold out until then. Some of the boys are gettin' yeller. All this yellin' is gettin' their nerve." He swore violently.

The doctor understood a moment later, when one of the bandits who had held a torch for the operation came flying down the slope, carrying his rifle in his hand. His face was white with terror. Up the slope, several crouched figures flashed across the green curtain, flitting from tree to tree. Junius roared, motioning the man back. The man paid no attention. He raced toward them, shouting at the top of his voice.

"Back to your post! You're not hurt!" Junius bellowed.

"They got us. I can't stand no more! I'm goin' to get my horse and take my chance," the other wailed, throwing away his rifle.

Junius rolled over and levelled his gun. It cracked once, and the man pitched forward on his face.

"That leaves a hole in the wall," said Junius. "Now I'll have to cover both sides—and they're in closer."

"Move in, boys, move in!" an excited voice was chanting. "We got them on the run. Sheriff's coming, and we got to get this done before he spoils the fun. Move in, boys."

Doc touched Junius on the shoulder and said, "Give me your gun. No—not your rifle, your .45. I can hold them back from that tree for a while, at least."

Silently, Junius pitched him the big revolver. The doctor filled all his pockets from the burly man's ample store of cartridges. He was off like a flash, running as he had seen the others run—stooped over, with his body parallel to the ground.

Slugs snarled over his back, and his blood seemed to chill at the sound they made. As he reached the tree, a heavy rifle bullet bit into it just over his head.

Suddenly he heard Junius open up back of him with the rifle. A man screamed up on the slope. The doctor dared a glance, and saw one of the teamsters writhing in agony, his shoulder smashed. Another man ran out and covered his fallen comrade, raining lead down the slope at Junius, who was unprotected from this angle.

The doctor lifted the forty-five and rested it on the fist of his other hand. He pressed the trigger. The teamster, hit low in the thigh, fell over.

Junius yelled approval. The doctor raised himself for another shot at a man who was creeping on his belly from one tree to another. The moment he raised his head the torrent of snarling lead centered on him. His throat went dry, but he held steady until he had his bead.

He fired. The creeping man jumped up and slashed at his hip. His whole leg was wet, and the doctor frowned. Had he hit the femoral artery—and if so, what was it doing there? And then he saw the absurd truth. What he had hit was a bottle in the man's hip pocket, and it was not blood, but rotgut whiskey, that had drenched him.

"That hits you in a vital spot, Barney!" a drunken teamster yelled. "You could spare some blood but not your liquor!"

The doctor smiled. But he realized a moment later that his shot at the man's bottle was an unlucky one. It centered attention on him—and it made them realize that they had an amateur marksman guarding this side! They had no way of knowing that it had been a difficult shot, and one well aimed. All they perceived was that one of their number had been harmlessly hit in his whiskey pocket.

A silence, as the teamsters conferred, was the first warning. Then they came pouring down the slope at him. He counted ten of them on his side alone. He heard Junius rush to his aid with a bull bellow of rage, his rifle held low at his hip, firing methodically.

The doctor stepped out from behind the tree. A forty-five, he knew, would knock a man down anywhere you hit them. He did not want to kill these men. On the other hand, he did not want to be hanged—by accident or otherwise. He fired at their legs.

One—two—three men dropped, struck in the legs. He saw two others go over, drilled through the body by Junius' big rifle. He saw Junius, beside him, take at least three slugs in the chest before the rifle slipped out of his hands.

The burly bandit, spitting blood and swearing to the end, slipped forward on his face. The doctor threw away his empty gun and braced himself to do the best he could bare-handed. His surgeon's hands, which had healed so many before they ever took up a gun, doubled into fists.

Then something hit him in the head, the sore part, where Junius had struck him with the gun. And he knew no more.

THE sheriff was bending over him when he awakened. The doctor sat up and pushed away the icy wet sops the officer was using on his torn scalp.

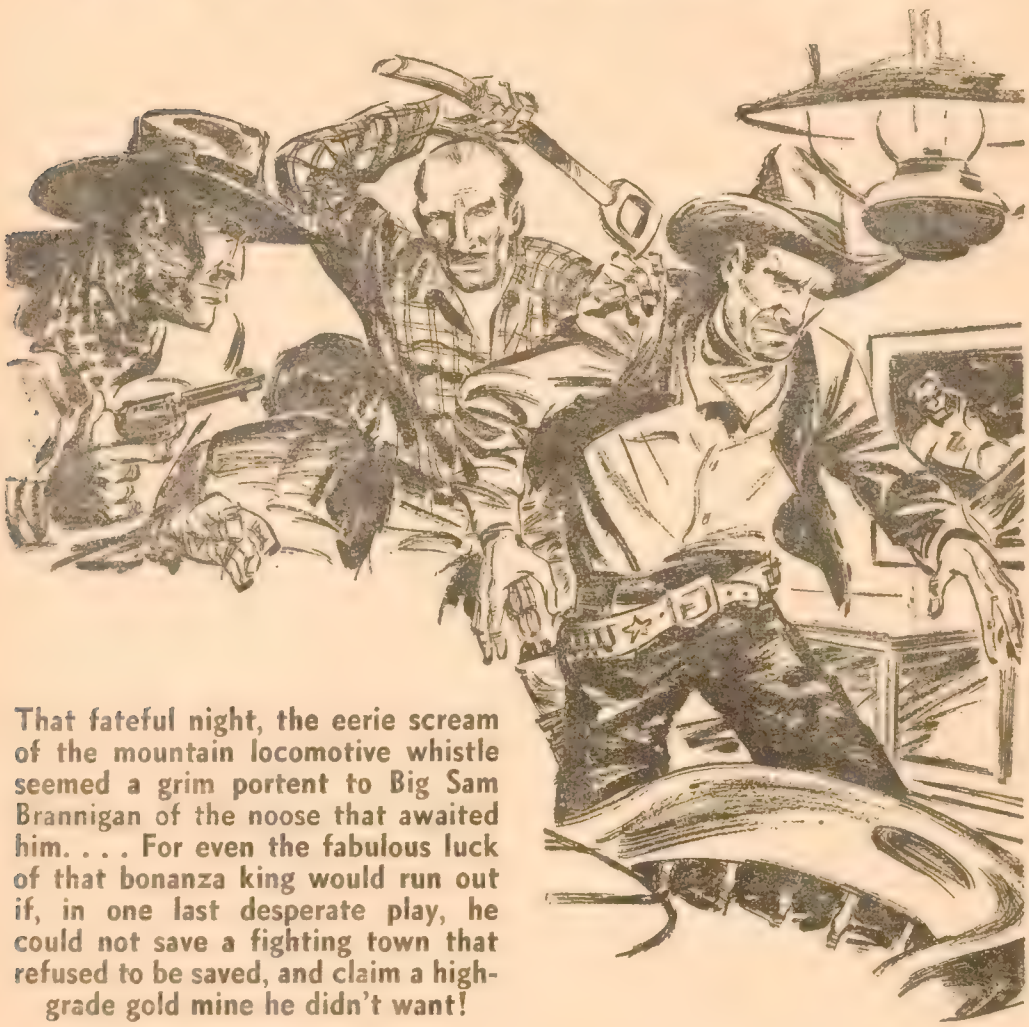
"Set still, Doc," the sheriff said, gently. "We seen the blood in your room and we read the sign that you hadn't come with them peaceable. Nobody blames you! And you put up a right good fight!"

"You darned right I did," the doctor said, with a glance at Tuck Mayolle. "I worked like a dog to save that man's life. I healed him when no other doctor in the world would have given him a chance. I wanted to see if he would pull through to the end, and those fellows were going to hang him before I found out."

"He'll hang anyway," said the sheriff.

"That's your business," said the doctor, struggling weakly to his knees. He crept over beside Tuck Mayolle, who lay quiet, but who snarled at him like a cornered wolf. "That's your business, but mine is to heal, not hang—and it's time to change his dressing. Turn over, Tuck!"

BRANNIGAN'S



That fateful night, the eerie scream of the mountain locomotive whistle seemed a grim portent to Big Sam Brannigan of the noose that awaited him. . . . For even the fabulous luck of that bonanza king would run out if, in one last desperate play, he could not save a fighting town that refused to be saved, and claim a high-grade gold mine he didn't want!

CHAPTER ONE

Meeting of the Boomtown Kings

EPITAPH CROSSING was only a whistle stop on the Virginia City & Truckee Railroad, and the two men waiting there had to flag down the southbound night train. Wooden brakes squealed, and the funnel-stacked engine—one of "Sharon's Iron Mules"—struggled to hold back the string of coaches. As the train ground to a stop, the conductor dropped from the rear coach and held his lantern high. "Coming aboard?" he demanded peevishly.

"That's right. Two passengers for Carson."

The pair came forward, moving in step, keeping close together—because they were manacled together. The trainman stared, trying to distinguish lawman from prisoner. The lean man wore the badge, and he said, "You first." The prisoner, a burly man, replied with a trace of irony, "Thanks," and clumsily took to the steps.

BONANZA WAR

Roaring Novel of the Untamed Gold Frontier

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

A pocket gun leaped like magic into the honkytonk owner's hand. . . .

Once inside the coach, with the train again underway, the pair found a seat under the staring eyes of the other passengers. One man said, in a stage whisper, "Who's that?" His companion looked up from the newspaper he held. It was a copy of the Virginia City *Enterprise*, and one of its front-page headlines read: "Brannigan Linked to Bonanza Murder!"

The man with the newspaper said, "That's Brannigan—Big Sam Brannigan. They've got something on him at last."

The train labored through the dark foothills at twenty miles an hour, the coaches swaying and lurching over the V.C.&T.'s uneven roadbed. After a moment or two of staring, the dozen or so other passengers went back to their talk, their reading or card playing. Brannigan tried to relax, but, handcuffed to the lawman, he was uncomfortable. The uneasiness in his mind was even worse.

His fortunes were at low ebb, and Fate was handing him one dirty deal after another. His usually keen mind was in a numbed state. All he knew at the moment was that a man could not think his way out of a murder charge. At the end of this train trip, the gallows waited. There would be a trial, of course. He would hire a whole squad of tricky-tongued lawyers, but in the end the jury's verdict would be "guilty" and the judge could do no less than sentence him to hang. There was enough evidence. It could happen to an innocent man.

Brannigan sighed like a man grown tired and old. But that was merely in his mind. He was but forty-five, and his thick body was too corded with hard muscle to know fatigue. There was no touch of gray as yet in his hair or mustache, and his eyes, though dazed from the blow Fate had struck him, were undimmed. He was a florid, handsome man. He looked what he was, a mine owner and bonanza king, not a murderer.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Help yourself, Sam."

"Thanks."

Brannigan searched in his pockets, found a cigar. He clamped it between his teeth and hunted a match. The lawman eyed him thoughtfully, seemed to make up his mind about something, and said, "I'll remove the bracelets while the train's in motion. . . ." He brought the key from his coat pocket and unlocked the handcuffs. Brannigan felt an inordinate relief. He said, "Thanks," again, and, taking a second cigar from his pocket, handed it to the lawman.

He found no match, so the lawman supplied one. He held it for Brannigan to light up, then started to puff his own cigar alight. Brannigan stared at his now unmanacled hands, and knew that this was his one chance—his last chance. He looked at his companion. The lawman was still holding match to cigar. Brannigan drew a deep breath—and struck out.

Two hundred and ten pounds of brawn was behind that blow. It caught the lawman on the side of the jaw, knocked him from the seat and into the aisle. Brannigan didn't wait to see if it was a knockout blow. He jumped up, bounded over the sprawled man, moved fast toward the rear of the coach. The other passengers had been stunned, but now some of them began to shout, "Get him! He's escaping!"

But no man rose to grab hold of the fleeing prisoner. Brannigan jerked open the door, slammed it after him. He wasted no time on the open platform, but took to the steps. He jumped from the bottom one, into inky darkness. He hit the ground and rolled down an embankment. When his plunge ended, he lay for a moment gasping for breath. Every bone in his big body felt jarred. Then he picked himself up and looked after the train. It was coming to a stop, no more than a quarter of a mile down the track. In a moment, it would come backing up—and Jarrett, the lawman, would be on the rear platform with a sixgun in his hand. Brannigan turned and plunged into the brush. . . .

BRANNIGAN knew these hills, the Washoe Mountains. He'd first prospected them more than twenty years ago, and they'd given him half a dozen fortunes in gold and silver—and a reputation for having the touch of Midas. That he lost his fortunes, one after the other, often in a gamble to help his fellowmen, won him scant credit. It was human nature to be envious, and too often Brannigan's famous luck earned him hatred and ill will. He knew now that he could count on little help, even from men he'd befriended, in the hue

and cry that would be raised for him. But he knew there were men in the hills who would give him a helping hand. . . . Less than an hour after he'd dropped from the train, Brannigan reached a sawmill operated by an oldster named Mel Eberts.

A call roused Eberts from sleep and brought him to the door of his shack, with a lighted lantern. He peered at Brannigan, then gaped with surprise."What in tarnation you doing here, Sam?" he demanded.

"I'm in some trouble, Mel. I need a horse."

"Sure. Help yourself at the corral. I'll fetch a saddle."

Ten minutes later, Brannigan rode away from the mill. He did not bother to take cover, but followed the winding foothill road. He headed for Epitaph, the silver settlement that was known as "Brannigan's town." It was there that he had been placed under arrest by Jarrett. Without a doubt, that was where the lawman would seek him. But Brannigan had a good start. Jarrett didn't know the hills; he would waste time hunting a mount. And Brannigan believed that if he had a few hours freedom, he could find some way to clear himself of the blame for Crazy John Bolt's murder. All he needed was a little time. That was why he had made his break. Free, he might be able to find out who had framed him. Seated in a jail cell, awaiting trial, he would have been able to do nothing.

Shortly before midnight, Brannigan reached Epitaph. He made no bold entrance, but rode in from the rear and dismounted at the back of the two-story brick building which was, on the ground floor, the office of his Cameo Mining Company and, on the upper, his home. The windows of both floors showed lights, and Brannigan knew that his wife, the lovely ex-honkytonk queen who had been Kate Belan, was worrying through a sleepless night. He would see Kate later, however. He entered the office, and two of his employes—Hank Burchell and Jeb Adams—were there.

Brannigan quickly shut the door behind him. The two men stared as though he were a ghost. Hank Burchell, his old friend and superintendent of the Cameo Mine, was a lean and leathery man in his fifties. Jeb Adams was the office clerk—a pale, thin man, sour looking.

Brannigan smiled wryly. "Holding a wake for me, boys?"

Hank came out of his chair, caught Brannigan by the shoulders.

"What are you up to now, Sam?"

"Jarrett and I parted company," Brannigan said. "I needed a little time." His heavy florid face darkened. "Maybe you two are convinced I murdered Crazy John. But I give you my word I didn't. He talked 'bonanza' all over town, and showed his ore samples to everybody he bumped into. Hank, you know I've grubstaked Crazy John—a dozen times."

"I'm not saying you killed him, Sam," Hank Burchell said. "Hell, if you figure you can prove your innocence, I'll side you." He eyed his boss, frowningly. "What's on your mind?"

"It was a put-up job," Brannigan said. "Crazy John was killed because of his gold strike, and the evidence was fixed to make it look like I killed him—because I was to share his strike. There's one person who's not in the game, but knows something. That honkytonk girl over at Serge Osborne's Silver Palace."

"Rita Nolan?"

"That's her name."

"I thought of her," Hank said. "But when I tried to find her, nobody knew where she got to. One thing though—she didn't leave town. I'd gamble on that. Maybe Osborne's got her in hiding."

"We'll see," Brannigan said. "You and I and some of the boys will pay the Silver Palace a visit. Can you round up some of our miners, Hank?"

"Sure. I'll go look for them. They'll be around," Hank said, and started for the door. Going out, he added, "I'll be back in half an hour. Meanwhile, keep out of sight. I'd hate to see a lynch mob get started."

Brannigan nodded to that, then turned to Jeb Adams. The clerk was a pale shade of a man, bitter by nature because he'd never lifted himself above a routine job. He said, "You want me to do anything, Sam?"

"You sit tight," Brannigan told him. "And keep your eye on the safe. . . ." He nodded toward the small safe at the rear of the room. "Crazy John gave me a map

showing the location of his strike. It's in that safe. Maybe his killer knows its here—and may figure on doing some safe-cracking. There's a derringer in my desk if you need it. I'm going upstairs now, to see my wife. . . ."

He turned to the door, aware of an odd look in Jeb Adams' murky eyes. Brannigan didn't know if that look was fear—or something else.

KATE was a gray-eyed blonde, a beauty still at thirty-seven. She drew her husband quickly inside on unlocking the door to his knock. Brannigan hugged her, was grateful that he had a worldly-wise woman for a wife. No matter how frightened or worried, Kate never gave way to feminine hysteria. She asked no questions, except with her eyes.

"I had to risk it," Brannigan told her. "My escape can't make things worse, and there's a chance I may be able to clear myself. You know how bad things are. Crazy John showed up in town yesterday, after three months in the desert. He was crazier than ever, but he'd found his bonanza at last. I tried to keep him from talking and showing his ore samples around until he filed his claim. But he was hell-bent on celebrating. He went and got drunk last night. . . ."

Brannigan started pacing, an old habit of his when troubled. "He was sly enough not to tell where he found his ore samples—even though half the town tried to get it out of him."

"But he told you, Sam," Kate said. "And folks know he did."

"That's one thing that looks bad for me," Brannigan admitted. "But Crazy John didn't exactly tell me the location—he gave me a map. He was determined to cut me in on his bonanza, because I'd befriended and grubstaked him so often when most people poked fun at him. But he had another map."

He went on talking, even though Kate knew all about it. Actually, Brannigan was thinking aloud and trying to find something that he had missed before. Last night, he had worried so much about Crazy John—believing the old codger was in danger—that he could not sleep. At midnight, Brannigan had gotten out of bed and dressed. He'd gone hunting for the prospector and found him drunk. He'd taken Crazy John out of the saloon, almost by force, and gotten him to the shack in back of the Cameo Mine office building. Brannigan had always permitted the old man to stay there when in town. . . . Yesterday morning, a town kid had been prowling around the shack and found Crazy John sprawled on the floor with his head bashed in. The old man was unconscious, dying.

"Another thing against me," Brannigan said. "I took Crazy John out of Serge Osborne's crooked dive. I was the last person seen with him. He was found dying on my property, and when the town marshal and the medico got to him he roused enough to mutter my name!"

"Sam—not that!" Kate exclaimed. "I didn't know that!"

"I shouldn't have told you now," Brannigan said. "I don't want to worry you too much. But Jock Langley, the marshal, kept trying to make Crazy John tell who jumped him. All John got out was my name. . . . Add it all together, and folks figure I killed him so I could have the whole of his bonanza."

"This town should know you better than that, Sam."

"Men are like wolves, Kate. They'll turn on their leader the first time he seems to stumble. . . . But there's one faint hope."

"That girl you told me about?" Kate said. "Rita Nolan, over at Osborne's place? I tried to see her today, but she isn't around. I don't know where she got to. After that U. S. deputy marshal arrested you—because Jock Langley wasn't sure you were guilty—I hunted Rita all over town. I believe she went away, Sam."

Brannigan shook his head. "She's hiding," he said. "Or being hid. That's why I came back—to find her. She's got to talk."

"You haven't much time," Kate reminded him. "Luke Jarrett is sure to be on your trail."

"I don't need much time," Brannigan told her.

He drew Kate to him, kissed her and left the parlor. Reaching the dark street, he found Hank Burchell there with more than a dozen burly men—muckers and powdermen from the Cameo Mine. They had armed themselves with pick and shovel handles, and so were ready for trouble.

Brannigan felt better, knowing that at least so many men were loyal. He said, "We're heading for the Silver Palace, boys. . . . But we won't start anything unless Osborne wants it."

It was after midnight now, but the Silver Palace, as well as the other pleasure emporiums, was still open and busy. With Brannigan in the lead, and Hank Burchell right behind him, the miners strode silently down the street to Osborne's place. It was a plush honkytonk, in imitation of the gaudy Virginia City places, bright with mirrors and lamps and gilt paint. A sudden hush fell over the crowd when Brannigan and his companions came through the swing doors. The music stopped and the dancing halted. Men looked up from their drinking and gambling.

Brannigan said, "You come along, Hank. The boys can wait here."

He saw Serge Osborne, a man nearly as burly as himself, at the far end of the long bar. He made directly for Osborne, and saw a darkness gather on the man's sallow face. Osborne was big and tough, but he had that sickly pallor brought on by too much lamplight and too little sun. Two hard-faced men, the honkytonk's trouble-shooters, moved over to flank their boss. The bartenders were attentive, ready for trouble. As the heavy quiet lasted, a percentage girl laughed nervously.

Osborne said, "Figured you'd be in the Carson jail by now, Brannigan."

"You figured wrong, this time," Brannigan said. "I had a little business here that had to be attended to. I don't want any trouble with you, Osborne—but if it comes, I can handle it. I've men enough here to take this place apart. I warned you a year ago, when you first came to Epitaph, that this was my town and I'd run you out if you didn't keep your nose clean. You remember, Osborne?"

Osborne's face grew even darker, and his beady black eyes turned ugly. "I remember," he said flatly. "I had to crawl to you, then, to get a start here. But I quit crawling, months ago."

"You've been running a crooked place, tinhorn," Brannigan retorted. "Men lose too much when they buck the tiger in your place. And what your games don't get, your percentage girls take. . . . Clean up, Osborne, or close down."

"You break away from the law just to talk big, Brannigan?"

"That was just something I had to get off my chest," Brannigan said. "I came here to see the girl you're hiding—Rita Nolan."

"Rita left town, Brannigan."

"I'd gamble my Cameo Mine that she didn't," Brannigan said. "My Cameo against this Silver Palace of yours. Is it a bet, Osborne?"

Osborne didn't say anything. His face just grew darker, harder.

"You want to send somebody for her?" Brannigan asked. "Or shall my boys and I look for her."

Osborne stepped away from the bar, faced the crowded room. Lifting his voice, he said, "Friends, this man's an escaped murderer. Maybe he even killed that deputy marshal to make his escape. I say it's our duty to grab him—"

He ducked as Brannigan lunged at him, and grabbed up a chair. He swung the chair up for a blow at the mine owner's head. But Brannigan got in under it and drove his bent knee to Osborne's stomach. Bedlam broke out all around the two fighting men. Osborne's two trouble-shooters reached for their guns, but Hank Burchell beat them to the draw and kept them covered. The Cameo miners rushed into the melee, using their clubs on men who tried to get at Brannigan. And Brannigan, wrenching the chair from Osborne's hands, struck a blow to the honkytonk owner's jaw. Osborne fell against the bar then tried to draw a pocket gun. Brannigan struck out again, and Osborne rolled to the floor.

Swinging about, Brannigan saw that the crowd was cowed by his men and that Hank Burchell had disarmed the two trouble-shooters. Warned off, the bartenders and house gamblers were keeping out of it. Brannigan told Hank and all but two of his men to stand guard. He took two burly powdermen and headed for the stairs he knew led to the honkytonk girls' rooms. Once in the upstairs hall, they threw open one door after another. The rooms were cubby-holes, brightened with bits of feminine touches. Several were occupied at the moment, but the girl Brannigan sought was not in any of them. He looked in the last room, surprised a girl preparing for bed.

He did not expect any help from the Palace people, knowing that Serge Osborne would have warned them to silence, so he didn't ask for Rita Nolan. But this girl in the last room signalled to him. Brannigan nodded, smiled.

He led his companions downstairs, where Hank and the others still kept the Silver Palace in a state of inanimation. Only Serge Osborne was missing, and drops of blood on the floor made a trail to his office door. The door was closed. Brannigan said, "Let's go, boys."

They went out to the street, and Hank asked, "No luck?"

"Osborne's got a share in Madame Feather's place on Two Street," Brannigan said. "The girl's there. We'll go get her."

Hank said, "How do you know? Somebody tell you?"

Brannigan said, "Nobody told me." He wouldn't give his informant away, to anybody. Instead, he would have to reward that girl for making motions of a huge-bosomed woman and holding up an ostrich plume. Her pantomine had fitted Madame Feather perfectly—and she hadn't talked!

CHAPTER TWO

Filing the Devil's Claim

MADAME FEATHER was a buxom, middle-aged woman who ran a small, quiet place frequented by men who didn't like the rowdier saloons. There was no need for a search to be made here, for the proprietress admitted Rita Nolan had been in her care. "Serge Osborne brought her," Madame Feather said, "but she could have left any time. I've not held Rita against her will."

She bellowed up the stairs, and when the girl answered, said, "Come down, dearie. You've got callers."

Rita's descent was leisurely, her slim but rounded body swaying rhythmically. She knew how to draw men's gaze—and used that knowledge all the time. The Cameo miners stared. Only Brannigan and Hank Burchell saw the fear in the girl's eyes.

Brannigan said gently, "No need to be frightened, Rita. We only want you to tell what you know about Crazy John's murder."

"Maybe I don't know anything."

"You knew something yesterday," Brannigan said. "You told somebody that you knew I didn't kill the old man—and that somebody mentioned it to me. When Jock Langley, the town marshal, questioned you, you denied such talk. Then you left the Silver Palace, and came here to hide."

"Maybe I wasn't hiding. Maybe I came here to rest."

"Maybe," Brannigan said. "But now you're coming with me."

"Where?"

"To visit my wife. You know Kate, don't you?"

Rita nodded. She had a doll-like face framed by a wealth of rusty red hair. Some of the uneasiness went out of her eyes.

"I'll go with you," she said, "but you can't make me tell you anything I don't know."

She walked between Brannigan and Hank, and the miners followed them back to the Cameo building. There, Brannigan told his men to stand guard. He was a little afraid Serge Osborne might pull something. He sent Hank for Jock Langley, wanting a law officer present when Rita talked—if she could be made to talk. Then he took the girl upstairs to Kate. Almost at once, Kate and the girl were talking like old friends. Brannigan smiled and lighted a cigar. Rita would tell what she knew. Kate would see to that.

Hank arrived with Jock Langley. The town marshal was a gaunt man with a droopy gray mustache. A peace officer during most of his life, he knew that the rules of the game had to be stretched at times. So he did not comment on Brannigan's escape from custody. He merely said, "Hank says this girl knows something, Sam. Let's hear it."

"You ready to talk, Rita?" Brannigan asked. "You've got nothing to fear. We'll see that nobody harms you afterward."

"I was warned to keep my mouth shut," the girl said. "And when Serge Osborne gives a warning, he means it. But if you'll see that he keeps his hands off me, I'll talk."

"We'll see to that," Brannigan promised. "You can stay here with Kate as long as you like—until this blows over. What do you know, Rita?"

Before the girl could speak, a sharp

whistle sounded outside. Hank Burchell went to see what was up, and he returned almost at once. He looked jolted. "Sam, that deputy United States marshal is down there. The boys are holding him off, but he's raising cain."

"Bring him up, Hank. He may as well hear this."

Hank returned to the door and called to his miners to let Luke Jarrett come up. When he stepped into the Brannigan parlor, he was scowling, but on seeing Kate and the girl, he held back the cursing he apparently wanted to do. Brannigan told him to take a chair. Jarrett shook his head and stood with his back to the door. He was a lean man, shrewd eyed. He said, "Go on with your party." He knew something important was happening.

Brannigan said, "This girl knows I didn't kill Crazy John."

And Rita, at a smile and nod from Kate, said. "That's right. Mr. Brannigan didn't do it. It was Pete Emory."

No one said anything, and Rita nervously went on, "I knew Crazy John before I came to Epitaph. A couple years ago, I was in a honkytonk at Trinity. Crazy John showed up there, sick. He keeled over on the street, and nobody did anything for him. Because he was loco, I guess. So I made a couple men carry him to a back room in the honkytonk. I nursed him for more than a week. He was grateful, I guess, because ever since he would look me up. When he came to Epitaph yesterday —Tuesday—he came to tell me he'd struck it rich. Then he got drunk. And about midnight, Mr. Brannigan came and took him away.

"I knew he stayed in the shack back of this building. I got to worrying about him, because he was so drunk. . . . So before the Silver Palace closed for the night, I went to look in on him. When I got close to the shack, I saw Pete Emory coming out. I guessed he'd been up to something, and I got scared and hid. When Pete was gone, I went to the shack. I saw Crazy John with his head all bloody. He looked dead. I got out of there—fast."

As the girl's voice died away, Brannigan said, "And you kept quiet because you were afraid of Pete Emory. Is that right?"

Rita nodded her red head.

"But when you heard folks say I'd killed Crazy John, you decided to tell what you knew?"

"Yes. But Serge Osborne told me I'd better mind my own business."

Brannigan turned to Luke Jarrett. "This is why I made a break," he said. "You willing to take her word, Marshal?"

"I have to take it," Jarrett said. "Shucks, Sam, I only arrested you because the evidence given me was so strong against you—and because the whole town claimed you killed the old man. But who's this Pete Emory?"

"A young hardcase who's been hanging around Osborne's Silver Palace," Brannigan said. "A wild kid who spends his time gambling and shining up to the girls. He's about five-ten and a hundred and forty pounds. He's blue-eyed and yellow-haired. There's a scar across his left cheek. I don't know why Osborne tried to cover up for him, unless they're in cahoots. Osborne might have wanted Crazy John's bonanza map."

"I'll have a talk with Osborne," Jarrett said. "And I'll pick up this Emory kid."

"He's gone," Rita Nolan said. "Pete Emory left town."

"How do you know?" Jarrett asked.

"I watched him all day," the girl replied. "He hung about the Silver Palace until you took Mr. Brannigan away, then he got his horse from the livery barn and rode out."

"I'll get on his trail," Jarrett said. "And get a dodger made up on him. I'll have every lawman in Nevada and California on the look-out for him."

"And I'll pay a thousand dollars reward for him," Brannigan said. "Not dead—but alive. Alive, he'll talk—and maybe tell if Osborne was in on the deal. Try to get him alive, Jarrett."

Jarrett nodded and left, and Jock Langley followed him. Hank Burchell went to tell the miners to call it quits for the night, then returned. Hank said, "Well, it's over for you, Sam. Your luck held. But you were pretty close to the gallows."

Brannigan nodded, but he still looked troubled. "This isn't the end of the trouble Crazy John's bonanza is causing," he said. "It's just the beginning. He had two maps he'd made. One he gave to me, and it's locked up in my safe. The other he must have had on him when he was murdered—

and if he did, Pete Emory's got it now."

"Still, you can file a claim," Hank said. "Crazy John wanted you to share his luck. With Emory on the dodge, you can beat him to the strike. . . . He won't dare file a claim once he knows the law's on his trail."

"I figure he never meant to file a claim," Brannigan said. "His type wouldn't go in for gold mining. He either killed Crazy John and stole the map so that he could sell the location of the find for cash—or else he was hired by somebody."

"Osborne, maybe?" Hank asked.

"Maybe. But unless Emory is caught, we can't prove anything on Osborne."

Brannigan placed a fresh cigar between his teeth, chewed on it as he began a restless pacing. Hank and Kate and Rita watched him with bewilderment. Finally Kate said, "Sam, you're worried about something bigger than Crazy John's bonanza. What is it?"

Brannigan said, "Once word leaks out about the location of Crazy John's strike, there'll be one of the biggest gold stampedes ever. And the old codger's strike was made in a valley settled by farmers. If there's a gold rush, those farmers will try to keep the boomers out—and there'll be one helluva of a bloody fight!"

BRANNIGAN rose early, was on the street and headed for the frame building that housed the lock-up and the town marshal's office by the time the red-shirted miners were on the way to work. Jock Langley wasn't in his office, so Brannigan crossed the street to the Nugget Cafe. The lawman was perched on a counter stool having breakfast. Brannigan joined him.

"Anything new, Jock?" he asked.

"Jarrett and I had a talk with Osborne last night," the old lawman said. "Osborne claims he only tried to keep Rita from talking because a honkytonk girl—according to him—should mind her own business. He swears he didn't know Pete Emory killed Crazy John. If he's lying, we can't prove it—till we catch Emory. Jarrett left town at sun-up, for Carson. He's going to have dodgers printed, offering a reward for Emory—like you wanted. I spread word around town that it was Emory who killed Crazy John, so you won't have any trouble with the citizens."

Brannigan nodded. He said, "I'll be out of town today. How about keeping an eye on Rita Nolan, while I'm gone? If Osborne should be in cahoots with Pete Emory, he may send some other tough to rough the girl up for talking."

"I've warned Osborne that nothing should happen to her."

"Osborne's riding too high, wide and handsome," Brannigan said. "I gave him a warning last night. If he doesn't clean up his games and stop his girls from taking the miners and boomers across, we'll close him down and run him right out of town."

"Watch your step, Sam," Langley said. "Osborne's not a man who'll take much pushing. He could hire a gunslick to put a bullet in your back."

From the eating place, Brannigan went to Tex Macklin's livery barn for a buckboard and team. He drove back through town, stopped at his office. He frowned and looked at his watch on finding the door locked. It was past time for Jeb Adams to be at work. But Brannigan then recalled that Adams had been ordered to guard the safe during the night; it was likely the bookkeeper had gone to his rooming house at daybreak to get some sleep. Using his key, Brannigan went in and got a derringer pistol from his desk. His safe, he noticed, was intact. His map of Crazy John's strike was still in his possession. . . . Leaving the office, Brannigan took the north road from town. He drove at a fast clip for his destination—Salvation Valley, nearly thirty miles away.

Back through the hills, Brannigan passed numerous diggings. Once or twice he talked to men he knew, but mostly he merely waved to their greetings. He forded creeks where other men were panning gold. Finally the road led through empty hills. As he neared Salvation Valley, he didn't even see wandering prospectors. This was country that had been prospected and passed over as worthless twenty years before. Only a crazy man, like old John Bolt, could have guessed that there might be gold in the Salvation.

The valley had been settled less than two years ago by a group of emigrants from the East. The outfit had traveled overland, and had met with near-disaster crossing the Utah-Nevada deserts. They had lost their

way, and, before being rescued, several of the members had died from thirst and exhaustion. Most of their horses and oxen, and much of their gear, had been lost. It had been Brannigan who suggested they settle in Salvation Valley. He had given them financial aid, in the form of a loan which was yet to be repaid. Now, as Brannigan drove into the valley through the one pass in the rock hills, he saw the cultivated fields and the little town which were the fruits of the colonists' labors. Men and women, and some of the older children, were at work in the fields. It was harvest time.

These people were like the Mormons. They had sought a land apart from the world at large, and their way of life was a simple one. They shunned worldly things. A fine frame church had been built, and its spire was tall above the nearby houses. Brannigan reined in by a field, and a lanky bearded man he knew as Hiram Zachary came from a melon bed to greet him. "Welcome, Brother Brannigan," Zachary said. "It is good to see you again."

"I came for a word with your leader, Reverend Jonathan Walsh," Brannigan told him. "Is he here?"

"No, sir. The parson is on a trip into the desert."

"What for, Zachary?"

"To lead some new settlers here," the farmer said. "He went to meet them so they wouldn't become lost, as we did two years ago. But I expect him to return any day. He's been gone a week."

Brannigan frowned, well aware that he'd made a useless trip. These settlers would do nothing without the consent of the young firebrand of a preacher who was their leader. He took out and lighted a cigar, offered one to Zachary who refused it.

Brannigan said, "I've bad news, friend. When Reverend Walsh gets back, will you tell him to come to Epitaph to see me?"

"I'll do that, Brother Brannigan," Zachary said.

BACK at Epitaph, Brannigan went to his office after turning his rig in at the livery barn. He was annoyed to find that the door was still locked, that Jeb Adams wasn't at work. He entered and regarded the safe with sudden doubt. His suspicions aroused, he crossed and worked the dial. The safe held a little cash and many important papers, and only one thing was missing. Crazy John's map. Brannigan muttered an oath. He had feared an attempt might be made to crack the safe. He knew that, during the time he was suspected of killing the old man, the whole town had believed he had the map in his possession—even though it hadn't been publicly known that there were two maps. But the map hadn't been stolen by a safecracker. It had been stolen by the only person besides Brannigan himself who knew the safe's combination—Jeb Adams, the bookkeeper.

Angry over such a betrayal, Brannigan went to Jock Langley's office and told him about the theft. The marshal said, "Jeb Adams left town early this morning. I saw him ride out. He had a livery horse. You want him picked up, eh?"

"If he can be found," Brannigan said. "I'll pay a thousand dollars reward for him—the same as for Pete Emory."

"I'll telegraph a description of Jeb to the sheriff and the United States marshal's office at Carson."

"Adams will probably head for a Government land office," Brannigan said. "He'll try to file on Crazy John's claim."

"He'd have to know it's exact location, Sam."

"It was marked on the map, Jock. John Bolt was loco, but he was plenty shrewd. He must have been trained as an artist or an architect— His map was the real thing. If he'd been sane, he wouldn't have needed a map. He did a lot of wandering on his prospecting trips, but he made his strike less than thirty miles from here. I'm telling you this in strict confidence, partner—Crazy John found gold in the north end of Salvation Valley."

"Where Jonathan Walsh settled his people?"

"That's right."

"Now I see why you're so all-fired anxious to keep anybody from filing a claim for Crazy John's strike," Langley said. "Once word gets out, there'll be a gold stampede—and Walsh's colonists will try to keep out the boomers. There'll be bloodshed, sure."

"Once I see Walsh," Brannigan said, "it'll be all right. I'll make a deal with

him. Maybe it's none of my business. . . . But I don't want to see that valley turned into a battle-ground. That's why I want Emory and Adams caught—to keep a stampede from being started too soon."

"You're sure there are two maps, Sam?"

"I saw them, Jock," Brannigan replied. "I had one. Crazy John gave it to me. He kept the other, and Pete Emory must have stolen it."

The marshal reached for his hat. "I'll go down to the telegraph office," he said, "and send out a description of Jeb Adams."

Brannigan followed him to the street. There Jock Langley said, "One way you could get the jump on Emory and Adams would be to do some claim-filing of your own. Crazy John wanted to share his strike with you, anyway."

"That wouldn't work," Brannigan said. "Whenever I file on a new location, word of it spreads—and there's a rush started. Too many hombres figure they can cut in on the Brannigan luck. No, that wouldn't work, Jock. We've got to keep the location of Crazy John's strike a secret, as long as we can."

"I have a hunch you can't stop this thing, Sam," Langley told him. "I know that parson, Walsh. He's headstrong, unreasonable, and I doubt that he'll leave the valley. He and his followers are like the Mormons. They won't mine gold or silver, themselves, and they sure won't let any boomers do it on their land. And you'll get for trying to keep the peace is a lot of grief."

"It's a chance I'm willing to take," Brannigan said, and headed for his office. With Jeb Adams gone, he would have to do his own office work. And being an active man, he hated the dullness of keeping books.

CHAPTER THREE

Parson on the Prod

EPITAPH had no church or minister, but one Sunday a month Reverend Jonathan Walsh would drive in from the valley to hold services in an unoccupied storeroom. It was usually the last Sunday in the month, and he would arrive in town Saturday evening to sweep the room, arrange the benches, and hang out a big muslin banner which read: Church Services Sunday—Everybody Welcome.

This Saturday, the parson arrived at sundown. He put up his horse and buggy at the livery barn, went to the storeroom to do his chores there, then came to the office of the Cameo Mining Company. Brannigan, having seen the banner go up, was waiting for him.

They shook hands in friendly fashion, and Walsh said, "Brother Zachary told me of your visit to our valley, sir. He said you wanted to see me."

He was a tall blond man of no more than thirty. Despite his somber clergyman's attire, he cut a fine figure. He was handsome, and time would make him distinguished looking. He seated himself, but refused Brannigan's offer of a cigar. Tobacco was a worldly pleasure, and Walsh scorned it.

"Zachary must have told you I have bad news," Brannigan said.

"He mentioned that," Walsh said. "But nothing can happen to the faithful. Prayer will strengthen us."

Brannigan decided to give it to him straight. "Gold has been discovered in your valley, Parson," he said. "You knew Crazy John Bolt?"

Walsh nodded. "A harmless old man," he replied. "He wandered about our valley—as simple in his ways as a child."

"Simple, yes. But he found the gold. He came to town with his ore samples—pure nuggets and gold-veined quartz. He was murdered, Parson, and the two maps he'd made to show the location of his find have been stolen. Can you see what that means?"

"There'll be men who will try to get that gold?"

"There'll be a rush of boomers," Brannigan said. "But not a dozen gold-crazed men—nor merely a hundred. If Crazy John's find is a real bonanza, which is likely, the boomers will come by the thousands."

"My people and I," said Jonathan Walsh, "will not permit it. We've found our promised land, and we'll hold it against the greedy and evil. God will be on our side, Brannigan. We'll ask Him to bless our arms!"

There was no arguing with him. Brannigan tried to reason with him to no avail.

Reverend Walsh admitted that no more than fifty of the colonists could take up rifles and defend the valley, but he put his trust in providence. He insisted no boomers would set foot in Salvation Valley. Brannigan offered him a deal; the bonanza king would resettle the farmers at Prospect City, a farm project he had started on the desert six months before. The land there had been irrigated, was fertile, and the people farming it were growing prosperous. Walsh shook his head.

"That is a worldly place," he said. "If I led my flock there, they would be exposed to evil. Prospect City is filled with saloons and other dens of iniquity. No, we won't leave our valley."

"Put it up to your followers, Reverend."

"The say is mine, sir."

"There will be bloodshed. It will be on your conscience."

"I shall give whoever comes fair warning," Walsh replied. "I thank you for your friendly interest, Mr. Brannigan. But my mind is made up."

He rose and took up his hat. He would have gone his way had not Brannigan said, "One minute, Parson." He too rose, and his ruddy face was dark with anger. Brannigan knew he was dealing with a prideful man, and he suddenly believed that if Walsh couldn't be reasoned with, he might be bluffed into being sensible. He went and took a paper from his safe.

"I'm no man to mince words," he said flatly. "I thought first of your people, because I've always sided the weak. But Crazy John Bolt meant to share his bonanza with me, and I need my share. The price of silver is down, and I'm operating my Cameo Mine only because I don't want to throw my miners out of work. My finances are in a bad way, and the gold at Salvation Valley will get me back on my feet. I'm going to file a claim out there, Walsh. Maybe more than one."

Walsh's face hardened. "I've heard men call you 'Midas' but I didn't believe you were that greedy."

Brannigan let that pass. He held up the paper he'd brought from the safe. "When you and your people settled in the valley two years ago," he said, "you were destitute. I made you a loan of five thousand dollars. This is the note you signed, Walsh. . . . A promise to pay at the end of a year. Not even the interest has been paid. The note is overdue. Suppose I demand payment?"

"We are in no position to pay," Walsh said thickly.

"And if I should take legal steps to collect payment?"

"You would force the colony into bankruptcy."

Brannigan nodded. "You have your choice, Parson," he said. "Either move out and save your people from disaster, or I'll sue for my money—force you into bankruptcy, and have the sheriff seize the colony's property. It can be done. This note is signed, 'Salvation Valley Colony, Reverend Jonathan Walsh, Leader.' It's up to you, my friend."

"Your threat doesn't frighten me," Walsh said. "It changes nothing. I'll pray for guidance, and I'll find a way to save my people from you and every other greedy person!"

He swung about, strode from the office, slammed the door behind him. Brannigan crossed and opened the door, to call him back, but then thought better of it and remained silent. Walsh was headed for the storeroom where he held his occasional church services, but he halted abruptly and stared at a man and woman who had come from Benson's general store. The woman cried out, for the man had caught her by the arm and was trying to force her to accompany him down the street. It all happened in less than a minute—the woman struggling against the man, then the parson coming between them. Angry words were spoken, blows were struck. The man—a hard-looking hombre—was knocked sprawling. Walsh dusted his hands, turned and bowed to the woman. Something more was said, between those two. Walsh offered the woman his arm. She took it. The two of them walked on together, and turned into the Nugget Cafe. . . . Brannigan felt that he'd witnessed something that could have happened only on a theater stage. For the woman who had been annoyed and rescued was Rita Nolan, the honkytonk girl.

KATE badgered Brannigan into attending the storeroom church services in the morning. He got into his best suit and accompanied Kate and Rita Nolan. He

sat between the two very attractive women, on a very hard bench, and, along with the hundred-odd people in the congregation, raised his lusty voice in religious song. A pianist from one of the honkytonks played the cabinet organ, and the Reverend Walsh led the hymn—singing from up by his home-made pulpit.

Brannigan squirmed as the parson's booming voice sermonized. The sermon was appropriate, and, since it was aimed at Brannigan, he reddened and wished he hadn't let Kate talk him into church-going. Reverend Walsh's sermon dealt with the evil brought on by greed. It lasted for nearly half an hour; then there was another hymn. Finally the parson asked two men to pass about to accept the offering, using their hats as collection plates. But before the collection was made, the young preacher made a heart-touching talk.

"Friends, you know my people of Salvation Valley," he said solemnly. "Some of them have come here to Epitaph with wagonloads of food—the fruits of our labor—the crops Providence gave us to share with you, to keep body and soul together. We were glad to share what we had. But, my friends, the life of farmers is hard. Our lot has been made difficult by a debt we owe to a rich man. This rich man is seemingly without charity and, like a Shylock demanding his pound of flesh, he demands that we pay our honest debt—or he will evict us from our land!"

A murmur rose, and some of the congregation turned to stare at Big Sam Brannigan. It was public knowledge that the settlers were indebted to him; it was not known, of course, that he had been trying a bluff when demanding payment of that debt. Even Kate looked at him in surprise. Rita seemed unaware of what was behind the preacher's words. She had eyes for no one but Jonathan Walsh. There were stars in her eyes. Rita was a girl in love.

Walsh went on, "We need five thousand dollars, friends. So give what you can. Your offering will do good in the eyes of the Lord. It will help us defeat the evil that comes of inordinate greed."

Without a word, looking a bit dazed, but smiling a Mona Lisa smile, Rita Nolan rose and quietly left the storeroom. Brannigan too, rose and went out. Only Kate remained to place something in the collection.

Outside, Brannigan stopped to light a cigar. He still had the red-faced look of a man badly humiliated. Jock Langley came along, halted beside him. He gave Epitaph's leading citizen—sometimes its most loved, and again its most hated citizen—a questioning look.

"What's up, Sam?"

"I've just been called a Shylock, Jock—and it hurts."

"The parson?"

"That's right. He's a tricky one—for a man of the cloth."

Langley nodded. He had something else on his mind. "No word came in yet on either Pete Emory or Jeb Adams," he said. "You hear about that hardcase accosting Rita Nolan on the street last night?"

"I saw it," Brannigan said.

"That hardcase was Reb Hanley. A sidekick of Pete Emory's," the marshal said. "I picked him up, and he spent the night in the lock-up. But he won't talk. Claims he doesn't know where Pete is. Says too, he didn't have any reason for bothering the girl. He's lying sure. Sam, what's Rita doing at the Silver Palace?"

Brannigan looked toward Osborne's place, just in time to see the girl disappear behind the swing doors. She had gone there, straight from church services. Brannigan didn't know what to make of it—or of Rita. She was still staying with Kate and him, though last night, after her trouble on the street, she had had supper with her rescuer, Jonathan Walsh. She had returned in a strange mood about eight o'clock, and had been quiet and dreamy-eyed during the remainder of the evening. What would take her to the Silver Palace now, Brannigan could not guess.

"We'll see," he said. "Come along, Jock."

It was still short of noon, but, since it was Sunday, with the mines shut down, some men were already gathered in the honkytonk. They were lounging at the bar, doing more talking than drinking. The bartender had a sleepy look, and a swamper was half-heartedly cleaning up. Brannigan glanced toward the door to Osborne's office. It stood ajar, and he saw Rita beyond it. He nodded to the marshal, and

they crossed the wide room. The girl was talking when Brannigan shoved the door farther open. Serge Osborne was seated at his desk. The honkytonk owner was still unshaved, and his beady eyes were underscored with dark pouches. He wore no coat, and his collarless shirt was a pale pink. He said, "Hold it, Rita," on seeing Brannigan and Langley.

Brannigan said, "No, don't hold it, Rita. Go on talking."

The girl had whirled about. She had an excited look rather than a dreamy look, now. She smiled. "I was just trying to make a deal with Serge," she said. "I want to help Reverend Walsh."

Osborne stood up. He muttered an oath, and said, "Rita, shut up!"

The girl's smile faded. Jock Langley stepped in, shoved Osborne back into his chair. "Let her talk, Osborne," he said. He glanced at the girl. "Go ahead. We want to know what kind of a deal you want to make with this tinhorn."

FOR a moment, Rita was frightened. But then she said, "I heard Reverend Walsh say he needed five thousand dollars to pay off a debt he owes somebody. I haven't got much money, but I do want to help him. I thought I could get five thousand dollars from Serge. . . ."

She was facing Brannigan. He said, "Go on."

Rita took a folded paper from the bosom of her dress. "I wanted to sell him this," she said. "It's a map of Crazy John's gold strike." The affrighted look in her eyes increased. "I didn't steal it!" she cried. "I had it all the time, but I was afraid to tell anyone I had it—because folks might have thought I had something to do with Crazy John's being murdered!"

"How'd you get it, Rita?" Brannigan asked. "Did the old man give it to you because you'd befriended him that time he was sick at Trinity?"

The girl nodded jerkily. "So few people were kind to him. He remembered that I'd nursed him. He always said he'd do something for me when he struck it rich. He gave me the map when he first came to town the other day. He said I should keep it for him, because somebody might try to steal it when he was drinking. He's dead now, so I've got a right to sell it. Besides, I'm afraid to keep it any longer. That man who grabbed me on the street last night tried to make me say I had it. He said Pete Emory told him I'd been friendly with Crazy John."

Brannigan was jolted. The girl held a bonanza in her hands, yet would sell it for a small part of its worth. And she did not want the money for herself. Certainly Rita Nolan had fallen hard for the young parson. . . . But in trying to help him, in offering the map to Osborne, she was innocently letting Walsh in for the very trouble he needed to avoid. Brannigan knew he had to get the map away from her.

He said, "This means that Crazy John was murdered for nothing. He'd made only two maps—I had one, and you the other. Pete Emory killed him and got nothing. Rita, did you look at that map?"

"Yes. . . ." The girl frowned. "But I couldn't make heads or tails of it. It's a crazy map. No names are marked on it."

"You'd have to know the country to read it," Brannigan told her. "Rita, I'll give you five thousand dollars for it."

The girl brightened. "You will!"

Osborne said savagely, "I'll give you ten, girl!"

Brannigan turned to him, and said, "No use bidding, tinhorn. I'll pay a dollar more than you can pay." He took the map from the girl, struck a match, touched the flame to the paper. As the map burned close to his fingers, he dropped it to the floor. Once it was wholly consumed, he ground the charred portion under his boot heel. "That does it, Osborne."

"Yes—for now," Osborne said flatly. "But don't think I'll forget. I'll even matters with you, Brannigan, if it takes ten years! Now get the hell out of here, and take that girl with you!"

Outside, Brannigan said, "Rita, go tell Walsh I'm going to destroy that paper of his I hold." He smiled on seeing the girl's surprise. "Yes, I'm the Shylock who was demanding payment on his debt. Go tell him, Rita. And you might hint to Kate that she should invite the parson to dinner at our place."

The girl hurried away, for the church service had ended and Walsh was standing outside his place talking to Kate Brannigan and some others of the congregation. Brannigan turned to Jock Langley.

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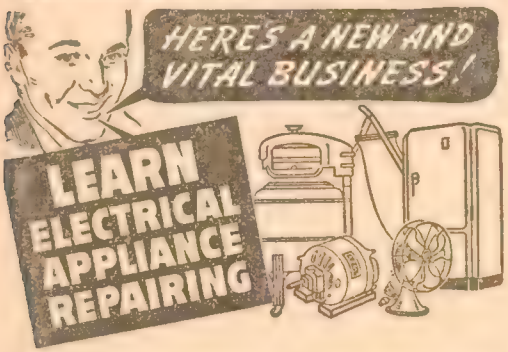

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"We're not in the clear yet," he said. "There's still the other map. The one Jeb Adams stole from my safe."

"And Walsh won't move his people from the valley, eh?"

"He's mule-stubborn, Jock."

"He can't be scared into being sensible?"

"Nothing on earth would scare that fire-and-brimstone preacher," Brannigan said. "But then, he's never seen a gold stampede."

Monday morning, Jock Langley came to Brannigan's office with a wire he'd just received from the town marshal at Trinity. "A hombre answering Jeb Adams' description has been picked up over there, Sam," Langley said. "You want to go have a look at him?"

"Sure. I'll leave right away."

They went to the livery barn and got a buckboard and team, then drove down Silver Knob. Trinity was twelve miles south of Epitaph, along the foothill road, and it was a smaller and less prosperous town. Perching precariously on a mountain slope, the place was a hodge-podge of tents and shacks and a few false-fronts. As Langley reined in the team before the boxlike town marshal's office, he nudged Brannigan.

"Take a look," he said.

There was a saloon directly opposite, and Serge Osborne had just come from it. He paused to light a cigar, smiled to himself on seeing the newcomers, then went to a waiting horse and buggy. He drove out of the town, taking the Virginia City road.

"He's seen Adams," Brannigan said. "I'd gamble on it."

They climbed from the buckboard and Mark Van Zandt, Trinity's peace officer, greeted them from his office door. "Howdy, Jock. Morning, Mr. Brannigan. You come to take Adams away?"

"If you've got Adams," Brannigan said. "Anybody else been to see him?"

"Yes; that lawyer-fellow that just drove away."

"Lawyer?" Brannigan said, frowning. "Osborne?"

Brannigan muttered an oath. Jeb Adams had outsmarted him a second time, and had made a deal with Osborne. Brannigan would have to pay out the thousand dollar reward—for nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Salvation Valley War

THEY went through the office to the cell block, and Jeb Adams was leaning against the iron bars of his cell door. He was puffing on a cigar, grinning unconcernedly. He said at once, "You can't prove a thing on me, Brannigan. It's your word against mine."

"Suit yourself," Brannigan told him. "But I'll do my best to send you to Carson prison. There's more involved than a map. You made a deal with Osborne, knowing he was after Crazy John's bonanza, when you found you didn't have nerve enough to file a claim in your own name. Osborne will do the filing, then send some gunhands out to Salvation Valley to take over his claim. Blood will be shed, because those settlers will fight to hold their land. Maybe that'll worry you a little, my friend."

He saw the grin fade from Adams' pale face, then turned away. He said to Van Zandt, "Jock will take him to Epitaph. I'll see that you get the reward I offered."

He climbed to the buckboard's seat and headed out the Virginia City road.

Two miles from Virginia City, Brannigan passed half a dozen riders heading in the opposite direction. Next he came upon a string of fast-traveling wagons loaded with men. He had to swing off the road to let them pass. Curiosity got the better of him, and he yelled, "Where's everybody headed?"

"Salvation Valley," he was told. "Gold's been discovered!"

He went no farther toward Virginia, but turned his team and headed after this vanguard of the stampede. There was no time to think of filing a claim now. Walsh and his followers had to be warned; they had to be pleaded with, made to see reason. Brannigan whipped up his team, and cursed Serge Osborne under his breath. Osborne had deliberately started the rush. Reaching Virginia City, he'd filed his claim and then spread word that there was gold at Salvation Valley. But the honkytonk owner had had no thought of sharing the bonanza. He simply wanted a stampede started, so that the swarm of boomers would beat down the

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settlers' defenses. . . . Osborne was letting others do his fighting.

The word spread ahead of Brannigan, no matter how fast he drove. He had passed the boomer-filled wagons before reaching Trinity, but the faster traveling horse-backers were still ahead. They shouted the news to men at the diggin's on the slopes and panning for dust at the streams. Trinity was swept by a wave of excitement as Brannigan drove through, its entire population crowded into the main street. Taking the Epitaph road, Brannigan traveled alone. The stampeders kept to a back-hill trail that led to Salvation Valley.

But the news had reached Epitaph by telegraph. People were in the street, milling about and talking loudly. Miners had quit their jobs. Some men were already on the way to the valley. *Gold!* Nothing else so roused men. There was magic in the word. Men would pass by silver to get their hands on the yellow ore. Brannigan reined in his blowing team at the Cameo office. Hank Burchell was there with Kate and Rita Nolan.

"Most of the men walked off the job," Hank grumbled. "You can't keep them working for five dollars a day when there's a bonanza to be grabbed."

"And there'll be hell to pay," Brannigan said, "for those settlers will try to hold off this gold-crazed crowd. I've got to try to reason with that parson. Rita, I want you to come with me."

"What for?" the girl asked. "What can I do?"

"You can try to make Jonathan Walsh come to his senses," Brannigan said. "He won't listen to me, but he maybe'll pay some attention to a girl he's lost his head over. Come along, Rita!"

She climbed up and seated herself beside him, then Kate said, "I'll go along. Rita will need some moral support when she talks to him. She doesn't know much about handling a man like Reverend Walsh.

Brannigan nodded. He didn't believe anyone could handle the parson of Salvation Valley.

MEN were trudging along the north road, some were loaded down with packs and gear while others carried noth-

ing at all. A few were leading pack mules, and some were mounted. All manner of wagons—buggies, buckboards, spring wagons, and at least one big ore cart—lumbered along the foothill trail. These were the first day's boomers, people from nearby. Tomorrow, the next day—those from farther away would arrive. They would come from as far away as the news would reach.

It was late in the afternoon when Brannigan neared the narrow cut in the rock hills. Here, at the Portal, the rush had stopped. The boomers had been halted by the threatening rifles of the settlers. Perhaps a hundred men were gathered there, standing in small groups, uncertain as what they should do next. Some warned Brannigan against driving on. "They'll shoot you down, sure," he was told.

"I'll risk it," he said, and drove on.

Kate was calm and unafraid, for she had witnessed many strange happenings in the mining country, but Rita looked frightened. Once through the pass, Brannigan drew up. About forty armed farmers were gathered there, and on each side of the road they had built a stone barricade behind which they could take cover if there was gun-play. Known to them, Brannigan was neither challenged nor threatened. The bearded Zachary waved him on, saying, "You'll find Brother Walsh in the village."

Following the road, Brannigan saw other farmers—these mounted—patrolling the upper end of the valley. The distance was too great for him to see if there were boomers in the rock hills to the north, but Brannigan guessed that some were there. Driving into the village, he found the women and children, and a few older men, calmly going about their farm chores and household tasks. One woman was taking wash down from a clothesline. A boy was milking a cow in a shed. Several small children were scattering grain to some chickens. Jonathan Walsh was on the street, giving orders to three of his followers.

"Welcome, my friends," he said, shaking hands all around. He was grave. He treated Brannigan as though they never had had any differences. He told Kate she was looking well. He held Rita's hand a trifle longer than necessary, and gazed

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steadily into her eyes. "I am very glad to see you. But this is a time of trouble."

"Trouble you can avoid, Parson," Brannigan said.

Walsh's face stiffened. "We've gone over all that," he said. "I have prayed and sought guidance, and I am determined to stay. My followers will support my decision. If we show that we'll permit no trespassing, those men will soon leave.

"I can't turn from the path along which I am guided," Walsh said. "If the boomers do stay, as you think they will, my people and I will defend—"

He got no farther, for guns were suddenly blasting—at the Portal.

HALF a dozen shots were fired, then there was an ominous quiet. Brannigan swore softly, and said, "Kate, you and Rita stay here in the village. I'll see what I can do down at the pass." Jonathan Walsh was already running toward a ground-hitched horse. He mounted and jogged away. He was riding a big gray, a farm animal.

With the two women out of the buckboard, Brannigan turned the team south. It was no more than two miles to the pass that the settlers guarded, and he reached it as quickly as the parson. Zachary explained that some of the boomers had tried to come through the Portal, and the farmers had fired to warn them off. The boomers had retired without putting up a fight. "But something else is being planned out there," the bearded Zachary muttered. "They're too many for us. More are coming, all the time."

Walsh said, with a show of confidence, "They'll soon turn away, now that they know we mean business." He was peering through the narrow pass, and added, "Here one of them comes—to talk."

A man carrying a truce flag—a white handkerchief tied to a stick—came striding boldly forward. The grim-faced farmers permitted him to advance to within a dozen paces. It was Len Burton, who owned a claim near Epitaph on Fry Pan Creek. Brannigan knew him as a mild-mannered sort, but now Burton looked angry.

"Walsh, I was sent you to give you a warning," Burton said flatly. "There are

more than three hundred men outside already, and twice that many are on the way here. You settlers can't keep us out. That gold was located at the north end of the valley—on land you people aren't farming. You've got no right to use guns to keep us out."

He flung his arm up and pointed at Brannigan. "You're playing his game. We know you religious people don't want the gold, but Brannigan does. He's got some scheme to grab it all for himself, and he's using you and your people to help him do his grabbing. Walsh, I'm telling—"

"Wait a minute, Burton," Brannigan said. "You didn't think that up yourself. Somebody put it into your head. Who was it?"

"Serge Osborne gave us a talk," Burton replied, sullen now. "He told us how you've been after Crazy John's strike, ever since he showed his ore samples in Epitaph. Osborne claims you—"

"Never mind," Brannigan growled. "I'll go talk to Osborne."

He started the team, drove out through the pass. Burton had told the truth, for more than three hundred boomers were gathered and out the foothill road, as far as Brannigan could see, came others. Some of the men were camping off to one side, having put up their tents and built cook fires. But most were standing or milling about. Brannigan could almost feel their bad temper. He reined in close to where Serge Osborne was haranguing a large group. He called the honkytonk owner's name.

"Osborne, keep my name out of this loco business," he said loudly. "I've got no claim filed—and right now I don't give a hang about that bonanza. I came out here for one thing only—to keep blood from being shed!"

"Fine talk, Brannigan," Osborne retorted. "But we don't have to believe it. You and those sodbusters are trying to keep the boomers from getting that bonanza. But you're not stopping us. That right, friends?"

A cheer rose from the nearest boomers, and it brought the others crowding up. Osborne was flanked by the two troubleshooters from his Silver Palace—Keyson

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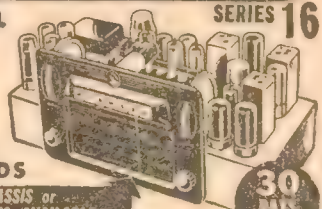
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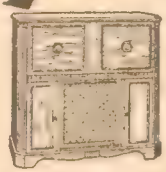
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and Brandt. Two other hardcases kept so close behind him that Brannigan guessed that they too were in the honkytonk owner's hire. Osborne was grinning. He was sure of himself.

"Let's rush those sodbusters, boys!" he shouted. "Let's show them that they can't scare off a crowd of gold stampeders!"

Hoarse cries rang out. That was all that was needed to start the boomers off. They started into the pass, pushing and shoving against each other. Brannigan cursed. Serge Osborne chuckled. And farmer rifles roared. Boomers' sixguns blasted. Men shouted, cursed—some cried out in sudden agony. Then there was panic. Terrified men came running from the pass. The Portal emptied of boomers, except for three dead men. The wounded, seven boomers, were dragged out by their fellows. . . . Anger gradually replaced fear. Osborne mounted his horse and rode about giving orders.

"Keep shooting through the pass," he yelled. "Keep them busy. Some of you hombres climb those rocks and fire down on those sodbusters. We've got them outnumbered. Keep firing at them!"

He was obeyed. Boomers armed with rifles took cover behind rocks and starting sniping through the pass. Others began scaling the cliffs. Brannigan watched helplessly, and silently cursed his own helplessness.

More boomers came up, by wagon and horse and afoot, and many of them joined in the fighting. Brannigan saw Jock Langley ride up on a blowing, lathered horse. The leathery-faced town marshal swung over to the bonanza king, reined in sharply and said, "Pete Emory's been caught. Jarrett, the deputy U. S. marshal, picked him up over in Virginia City. Emory squealed. He killed Crazy John, all right, for the map—and didn't get it. He claims Osborne paid him to steal the map and do away with the old man." He gestured toward the pass. "But what the hell's going on here?"

"Osborne's work," Brannigan said. "But maybe we can stop it now—for a time, at least. He's got four hardcases with him, Jock—tough odds. Are you willing to arrest him?"

"I'm willing to make a try at it."

"Good. I'll side you," Brannigan said.

He was armed only with a pocket gun, a short-barrelled derringer which was effective at close range. But when Jock Langley rode toward Osborne and his hardcases, Brannigan swung his team after him. From the start, this had been a game between Osborne and himself—a grim sort of death game with a bonanza for the stakes. Brannigan was ready to end it now, one way or another.

Langley reined in facing Osborne and his four men, all of whom were mounted for a rush into the valley. Osborne had some premonition of new trouble, for he demanded, "What's ailing you, marshal?"

Langley's right hand gripped his holstered sixgun. He looked at men siding Osborne, two to a side, and said, "You boys keep out of this. Osborne's done for. As of now, he won't be paying you wages for gunguarding him. He's headed for prison, as an accessory in a murder."

Osborne had a jolted look. "You're loco, Langley," he said. "You can't prove I was mixed up in a killing."

"Pete Emory is under arrest, Osborne," Langley said mildly. "And he talked. He talked and named you, to make it easier for himself. Don't try anything, tinhorn. Just ride off ahead of me, and let your gunslicks stay behind. You savvy?"

Osborne nodded. "I savvy, all right," he said. "I gambled—and lost." He smiled thinly. "But I'm not going to prison—or maybe to the gallows." He lifted his voice. "Boys, I'll pay each of you a thousand dollars to get me out of this. Now!"

BRANNIGAN grabbed out his derringer. Langley's sixgun was already blazing, as were the weapons that had come into the hardcases' fists. Osborne kicked spurs to his mount, drew a gun, and made a break. He got past Jock Langley, for the lawman, having downed a hardcase, had been hit and was swaying in the saddle. Osborne still had to get by Brannigan, and fired his first shot at the mine owner. Brannigan's team spooked, reared up wildly, collided with Osborne's horse. There was a moment of bedlam. Even as Osborne's mount stumbled, the man fired

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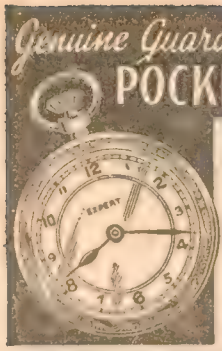

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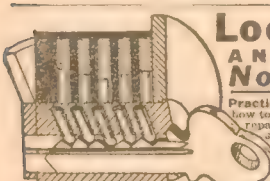

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again. Brannigan had taken his time, and now squeezed the derringer's trigger. He saw Osborne hit by its .44 slug, saw the man tossed from the saddle. The three remaining hardcases were past Brannigan now, and he fired after them to keep them going. There was a sudden quiet, for even the boomer guns were silent now.

Brannigan jumped from the buckboard, bent over Osborne, made sure he was dead, then he went to Jock Langley. The marshal had spilled from his horse and lay on the ground. Brannigan bent over him. "How bad is it, Jock?"

"Bad enough," the old lawman said. "In the right side. Cracked my ribs, and the pain is hell. But I'll pull through. You got Osborne?"

"I got him."

"What happened there at the pass?"

"I don't know," Brannigan said. "But the shooting is over."

When he reached the village, Walsh was seated dejectedly on the church steps. He held his head in his hands. Rita Nolan sat beside him, apparently murmuring comforting words.

Zachary and another farmer carried Jock Langley into one of the houses. Brannigan left the buckboard and said, "Buck up, Walsh. You made a mistake, but there's no use grieving." He laid a friendly hand on the parson's shoulder. "You were slow to see that you were wrong, but you ended the trouble before it got to be a pitched battle."

Walsh looked up, a humbled man. "It wasn't I who put a stop to it," he said dully. "When the shooting started, I lost my head. I didn't know what to do. But then the women came. They made the men return to the village and let the boomers come through. Your wife led them."

Brannigan heard no more. He saw his wife, blonde and lovely, coming toward him from one of the farmhouses. She was bringing him a meal—a cup of coffee in one hand, a plate of food in the other. Brannigan went to meet her. "Up to your old tricks," he said, grinning, taking the plate from her.

"At times, Sam," Kate said, "women are more sensible than men."

THE END

(Continued from page 29)

a desperate attempt to annihilate the men standing between them and their water supply. Two of the Virdlen men forgetting Parmenter's party in the wash, raised to fire at the men in the pool. Their heads came above the wall to become targets. Parmenter's group sent half a dozen shots crashing into the heads of the men. Another of Virdlen's bunch was shot through the body by the Keegan rifleman on the cliff, and screamed in agony falling back against a boulder.

Virdlen shouted an order and his men followed his example, to lie flat on their bellies, pumping shots wildly toward the pool. Caught between two sets of guns, cut off from their horses, water and supplies, they were in a panic. The blazing heat added to their terror. As bullets whirred a few inches above their flattened bodies, they cursed Virdlen's stupidity in not forestalling an attack by way of the mountain. Relentlessly the bullets poured in. The man left by Keegan on the cliff was a dead shot and from his elevation he was able to pick

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off one man after the other. With half his men hit in the exchange of shots, Virdlen raised a call for a truce. The guns stopped reluctantly.

"Keegan," Virdlen called, "we've been friends. You can't shoot us down in cold blood. Talk your bunch into making a deal."

"What kind of a deal did you offer the Dog Diggings miners?" returned Keegan. "Our only deal is for you to come out, all of you, with your hands up. After that we'll deliver you for trial at Stocker's Ferry."

Virdlen hesitated. Then, "Go to hell!" he bawled. "They'll never put me on trial, and we're not done yet." Madness came to Virdlen and the other seven still unwounded men. Springing to their feet, they rushed toward the pool, firing wildly as they ran in the hope of smashing Keegan's party and taking possession of the water.

They ran in a low crouch but they were nevertheless easy targets for both Keegan's and Parmenter's men. Keegan alone held his fire. The seven were doomed, and he had been a guest at Virdlen's trading post, eating at the man's table.

The rush of the men made mad by heat and despair lasted only a few steps. Relentlessly the guns mowed them down and they fell, to lie like limp rag dolls dropped carelessly on the desert floor. When the guns stopped again, two of the wounded begged frantically for help, and the men who had just shot them down carried them into the shade of the cliff to tend to them.

KEEGAN looking at the scattered dead renegades thought of the massacred miners he had seen in Black Pass. They were avenged at last. The blond Virdlen lay on his back, staring up at the brassy sky, a smile twisting the corner of his mouth, as if he were amused at the end of the venture. Then Boone thought of Stocker and what a surprise Honest John would get when Ben Shuff was brought in to give evidence against him. There would be hangings in the adobe jail yard at the Ferry, but Mary Emory would not be there to see them. She would be teaching school in Pardo Canyon.

The wagons were brought up and the thirsty stock watered at the pools. The dead men had been carried over a little

ridge where a trench was dug for a grave. That afternoon Parmenter read from a Bible, and gravel and earth were shoveled into the trench.

There was a little grazing for the horses and the few head of cattle in a neighboring canyon. At night cook fires sprang up near the pools and children shouted and played games where a few hours ago the guns had crashed out in death. A guitar appeared out of nowhere, and there was singing.

Keegan and Mary Emory sat on a little knoll, looking down on the fires and the people moving around them. The shrill laughter of children took away the horror of the gun battle and the spell of fear that had lain heavily on the wagon train.

"I like these people," Boone said. "Even if they did have the idea of hanging me a couple of nights ago. They're still apologizing for that. They've offered me an equal share with them if I stay with them in the canyon. They figure they may need a guard against other thieves. But a single man like me would have no place down there with those families—he'd be left out. Same thing with a girl like you, single and alone—she'd feel left out too."

She looked at him in her direct way, and then she laughed. "Have you anything to suggest?"

"Nothing," Boone said soberly. "Except that Parmenter did say he had once been a regular minister. If—if you're willing to live in the desert, Mary."

Her voice dropped to a soft murmur. "The desert doesn't scare me. Not if I'm with you, Boone Keegan."

THE END

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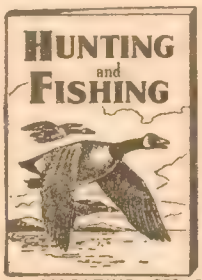

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(Continued from page 35)

hit for cover. Over his shoulder, Frosty said, "Looks like I'm that world's biggest posse you was talkin' about, boss. Where do we go from here?"

There was no choice in the matter, for within seconds Cass Trackett's men were slicing the hillside with hot lead. Hopelessly outnumbered, Frosty and Brownie started falling back, ducking from rock to rock. Once Brownie saw Frosty stop and grab his arm, then he came on and Brownie risked his neck to pull the lanky redhead to cover.

The two held their fire until they could see a target, then they cut loose and made four shots bring down as many men. But their muzzle flashes had made them spot targets, and the fire of the Cass Trackett outlaws concentrated on a spot not six feet square. Brownie felt fire across his leg. He heard Frosty slapping at himself and he could smell the smoke of burning cloth. A lump formed in Brownie's throat, and he reached out and touched Frosty's hand. The redhead clamped down, and although neither man spoke they knew they were saying good-bye and all is forgiven. The Cass Trackett men closed in for the kill, but they never reached the rock pile that hid the two saddle pals. A new rattle of gunfire had drawn their attention.

For a second, Brownie squatted there, unable to believe his eyes, then he gave a wild whoop as he recognized Chuck Parkinson and his Circle C riders.

Coming in from behind the way they had it didn't take Chuck Parkinson and his crew long to gain the upper hand, and within ten minutes Brownie was able to walk out with all his official importance and take over the situation. Cass Trackett himself, sullen and deflated by the sudden turn of affairs, was meek as a lamb, but Polka Kate, when they flushed her out of the cabin, came out clawing and kicking.

In the excitement of catching big game, Brownie forgot the Circle C horses, but the sight of Chuck Parkinson heading for Frosty with a rope in his hand brought that angle back to mind. Stepping back Brownie jabbed a gun half way through the Circle C owner's middle and in a few hundred well chosen words he removed any ideas Chuck

might possibly have about Frosty being a horse thief.

When he was finished Chuck was satisfied and Frosty was sentimentally contrite as he told Brownie it was the finest character recommendation he had ever heard in his long career.

And so it was that Acting Sheriff Frank Brown brought the Cass Trackett bunch into Alturas, and riding knee to knee with him was the former horse thief, Frosty Starret.

Brownie insisted that Frosty let the doc patch up that arm scratch first off, and then turning his buckskin into the corral with Sheriff Bradford's lonesome pinto he went on to receive the plaudits of the Citizen's Committee who were torn between the praising of their acting sheriff and Joe's offer of free drinks. It was in the middle of this that Brownie suddenly realized with genuine misgiving that Frosty Starret had disappeared.

The Citizen's Committee, after their first free drinks at Joe's, were back in the street. They slapped Brownie on the back. They said he was the greatest sheriff that ever lived. They said they would tell Bradford he had better look to his laurels or he would be defeated at the next election. They were still saying such kind things when Brownie went down to the corral to look after his horse.

It made Brownie feel good. It made him choke all up inside. In fact, it made him feel so danged good that he decided right there he would say he traded it off if anyone ever asked him what became of that little buckskin he used to ride.

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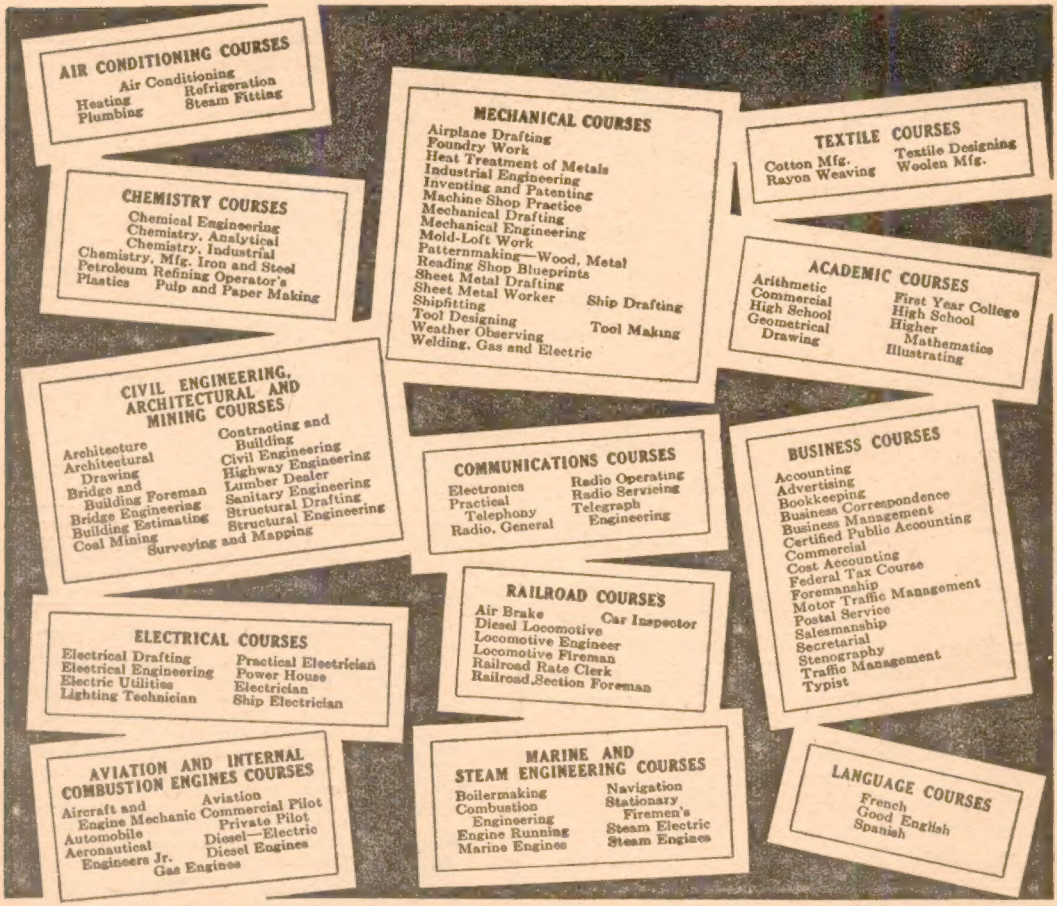

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